

**‘We are Inclusive but are we being Equal?’
Challenges to Community National Schools
Regarding Religious Diversity**

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DECLARATION

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Education, is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BST	Belief Specific Teaching
CNS	Community National schools
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DCU	Dublin City University
DES	Department of Education and Skills (previously known as the Department of Education (1921–1997) and Department of Education and Science (1997–2010))
ERBE	Education about Religion and Beliefs and Ethics
ETB	Education and Training Boards
ETBI	Education and Training Boards Ireland
GMGY	Goodness Me! Goodness You! Programme
HBH	Humanist-Buddhist-Hindu Group in Belief Specific Teaching
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
P.E.	Physical Education
RE	Religious Education
REDCo	Religion in Education: A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries?
VEC	Vocational Educational Committees

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*'You are a child of the universe,
no less than the trees and the stars;
you have a right to be here.
And whether or not it is clear to you,
no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should'.*

(Max Ehrmann)

ABSTRACT

Aiveen Mullally

‘We are Inclusive but are we being Equal?’

Challenges to Community National Schools Regarding Religious Diversity

The aim of this research is to explore the challenges being faced by Community National schools due to religious diversity. These schools were established by Minister Mary Hanafin in 2007 in response to the emerging reality of pluralism in Ireland. They are publically-managed state schools and the Education and Training Boards (ETB) are their patron. To date these schools largely cater for minority ethnic communities in Ireland with 58% of parents being of nationalities other than Irish (Department of Education 2016). The schools are multi-denominational and the ethos is inclusive, striving to ensure that the beliefs of all children are respected and celebrated. There are currently twelve schools in the sector. As these schools are a new model of governance, very little research on the schools has been conducted to date. This research was considered timely in order to assist with the development of these schools and to contribute to the educational debate regarding the place of religious education in education in Ireland.

This qualitative case study explores the practical and ideological challenges facing Community National schools regarding religious diversity from the perspective of principals, teachers and parents. The methods chosen for the research were semi-structured interviews with seven principals and five teachers and questionnaires for parents.

This study reveals significant challenges for the stake-holders regarding the multi-belief junior programme being taught in the schools. Findings highlight an uneasy tension between the schools and local parishes regarding the sacramental preparation of Roman Catholic children. Findings also indicate challenges for schools regarding the celebration of festivals and the display of religious symbols in the school. A tension between the public values of the school and the private values of parents is also revealed.

The thesis concludes by considering the implications emerging from this research and offers recommendations for reflection by the various stakeholders of these schools.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

This study explores the challenges experienced in Community National schools due to religious diversity within the school population. This first chapter provides the rationale and scope of the research. It presents the aim of the research and a historical overview of Community National schools. The chapter concludes by considering the limitations and delimitations of the study and outlines the layout of the thesis.

1.1 Rationale and Scope of the Research

Ireland has undergone significant changes since the 1960s with the advent of the European Union, a rapidly changing social and economic structure, and changing demographic patterns emerging from immigration and emigration (Devine 2011; Tyrell, Darmody and Song 2011; Faas, Darmody and Sokolowska 2015). Whilst Ireland was not a mono-ethnic country prior to the Celtic Tiger, the population in Ireland has become increasingly diverse over the past two decades. This diversity represents a wide variety of cultures, languages and faith systems.

In 2011, 17% of the Irish population were from immigrant backgrounds, with 10% of children in this country aged 14 or younger, born outside Ireland (CSO 2012). The 2016 census records show that 1.3% of residents (almost 64,000) describe themselves as Muslim. As well as becoming more religiously diverse, there is also a notable increase of those adopting a secular stance in the state. Almost 10% of the Irish population now state they have no religion, increasing by 74% from 2011 (CSO 2017). The largest-growing minority faith groups are Orthodox and Apostolic / Pentecostal (CSO 2017).

The 2016 census also highlights the sharp decline of people identifying as Roman Catholic in Ireland, falling from 84.2% in 2011 to 78.3% in 2016 (CSO 2017). It also tells us that half of the citizens who do not identify as Irish in the 2016 Census are Roman Catholic; namely people from Poland, Lithuania, the Philippines, Nigeria and Brazil. This growing religious and cultural diversity has resulted in many changes and challenges to schools as they seek to adopt more inclusive practices (Faas 2010).

Public debates are ongoing on the role of religious education in schools, on religious pluralism, and about what equality in education in Ireland now means. ‘Increased religious diversity and secularism are likely to pose substantial challenges for schools in terms of catering for the needs of all pupils and parents’ (Faas, Darmody and Sokolowska 2015, p. 83). One of the responses of the government has been the establishment of primary Community National schools. These schools are a new initiative that seek to provide for the emerging diversity of religious beliefs and practices in Ireland today. This research will explore the challenges of religious diversity being experienced in this emerging model of primary school.

Community National schools were established by Minister Mary Hanafin in 2007 with the local Vocational Education Committee (VEC), now known as Education and Training Boards (ETB), as their patron. ETB are statutory authorities which have responsibility for education, training and youth work. Community National schools are publically-managed state schools. There are currently twelve schools in Ireland; nine in the Leinster area, two in Cork and one in Kerry.

In recognition of the diversity now present in many communities in Ireland, Minister Hanafin stated at the launch of this new model of schooling that they are multi-denominational, ensuring that the schools cater for the diversity of religious faiths represented in the area served by the school: ‘Provision will be made within the school setting for the religious, moral and ethical education of children in conformity with the wishes of their parents’ (Hanafin 2007).

To date these schools largely cater for minority ethnic communities in Ireland with 58% of parents being of nationalities other than Irish (Department of Education 2016). The ethos of the schools state that ‘everybody is valued and treated with respect and diversity is recognised and celebrated. Respect for plurality of faiths is seen as integral to the daily routine of the school’ (Community National schools (a)).

It is increasingly acknowledged that addressing religious belief and practice in schools help provide meaning and orientation for children of migrant communities (Knauth et al. 2008, Ní Raghallaigh 2011, Faas et al. 2017b). The Irish school system, particularly at primary level, is predominantly denominational in nature. As the numbers of schools in

Table 1.1 indicates, 90% of primary schools are currently under the patronage of the Catholic Church. Approximately 6% are owned by the Church of Ireland with a small number of other Christian schools, namely Presbyterian and Methodist. There are two Muslim schools and one Jewish. Outside the denominational system, Educate Together schools describe themselves as ‘equality-based’, multi-denominational schools. They are the fastest growing school type in Ireland at present. Together with the new Community National schools they account for most of the new primary schools being built in the last decade.

Table 1.1: Patronage of Primary Schools in Ireland (Department of Education and Science, (2016a)

Patron	Number of Schools	Percentage
Roman Catholic (including Gaelscoileanna)	2808	89.8
Church of Ireland	175	5.6
Other Christian	17	0.5
Muslim	2	0.1
Jewish	1	0.03
Educate Together	81	2.6
Community National schools	12	0.5
Gaelscoileanna	10	0.3
Other	5	0.2

In April 2011 Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairi Quinn, who had replaced Mary Hanafin, established a Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector. The aim of this forum was to establish greater diversity of school provision in a more pluralist Ireland. The minister assured that his aim was not to impose a secular agenda on schools but to ensure that the school system reflects parental wishes and that school provision actually matches the religious and sociological realities in local communities (Drumm 2012).

There is a considerable amount of literature available on challenges faced by teachers and principals in denominational schools in Ireland with regard to religious diversity (Dunne 1991; Devine 2005; Mahwhinney 2007, Mahwhinney 2009, Hogan 2011). There is a dearth,

however, of academic literature pertaining to the issues facing multi-denominational schools in Ireland today.

As Community National schools are a new model of governance, very little research on these schools in particular has been conducted to date. In order to assist with the development of these schools and to document the challenges faced as they emerge and grow, it is timely to conduct in-depth research into the successes and difficulties facing this model of schooling, particularly regarding how religious diversity challenges the ethos they hold. The research will seek to provide a snap-shot of the ideological and practical issues emerging in Community National schools due to pluralism and religious diversity.

1.1.1 Research Aim and Questions

The aim of this study is to give voice to the challenges being experienced by three stakeholder populations in Community National schools; principals, co-ordinating teachers and parents due to the reality of religious diversity. The research questions this study seeks to address are:

- Does Community National schools' inclusive policy meet the needs of the various communities of faith and beliefs in Ireland today?
- Is it possible to cater for all beliefs in a common religious education programme?
- What type of religious education programme and pedagogy would be appropriate in a state school system that seeks to support and cater for the belief nurture of all pupils during the school day?
- What other challenges face Community National schools regarding religious and secular iconography, sacramental preparation for Roman Catholic children and the celebration of times of significance and religious festivals?
- What are the views of parents regarding the ethos and guiding principles of the religious education programme and what challenges, if any, do they experience due to their faith or belief?

The title of this thesis emerged during the data collection phase of this research during an interview with a teacher who posed the question: 'We are inclusive but are we being equal?' (T3). This question encapsulates the challenge at the heart of this research.

1.2 Setting the Context: Historical Overview of Community National schools

In order to contextualise this study, it is important to briefly outline the history of Community National schools. This section provides an overview of the aims and development of Community National schools in Ireland and their approach to religious education.

In 2007, a situation arose in Dublin 15, an area with a large number of newcomer families, whereby a number of pupils from different religious and ethnic backgrounds were left without school places (Lowe 2011). This prompted the Department of Education to establish a new model of schooling and governance in Ireland that would be multi-denominational and publically-managed. The first school, an emergency school, was initially under the patronage of the Catholic church at the request of the then Minister for Education. As the model grew, the schools were assigned the temporary patronage of the Minister for Education while awaiting legislation to be enacted.

In 2016 the ETB took over the management of the schools and became patrons at primary level for the first time. Community National schools are therefore one of only two examples of the state *providing* rather than *providing for* education at primary level. The other such school types are the Model Schools, established as teacher-training institutions in the 1830s before the foundation of teacher-training colleges. There are currently twelve Community National schools in Ireland as outlined in Table 1.2 and it is expected that this number will continue to grow in the coming years:

Table 1.2: Name and Location of Current Community National schools

Name of School	Location	Name of School	Location
Scoil Choilm	Clonsilla, Co. Dublin	Scoil Aoife	Tallaght, Co. Dublin
Scoil Ghráinne	Phibblestown, Co. Dublin	Scoil Aonghusa	Mallow, Co. Cork
Naas CNS	Naas, Co. Kildare	Greystones CNS	Greystones, Co. Wicklow
Ard Rí CNS	Navan, Co. Meath	Lucan CNS	Lucan, Co. Dublin
Citywest & Saggart	Citywest, Co. Dublin	Scoil Chlíodhna	Carrigtwohill, Co. Cork
Scoil Chormaic	Balbriggan, Co. Dublin	Two Mile	Killarney, Co. Kerry

1.2.1 Vision and Ethos of Community National schools

Community National schools are seeking to provide a new model of primary education that reflects Ireland in the 21st Century (Community National schools (b)). They are state operated, multi-denominational, inclusive schools that welcome all children from the communities they serve (Conboy 2017, p. 4). Each child is welcomed, respected, cherished and facilitated in reaching their full potential whatever their background, nationality or faith. The Ethos Statement espouses that:

- The school becomes a centre of the local community
- Children are encouraged and supported in living their lives to the full
- High standards are the goal in teaching and learning
- Everybody is valued and treated with respect
- Diversity is recognised and celebrated
- Respect for plurality of faiths is seen as integral to the daily routine of the school

[Community National schools (a)]

The four main cornerstones of the ethos are: excellence in education, multi-denominational, equality-based and community-focused. The school seeks to serve the local community without prejudice regarding class, creed, nationality or health status. The central role of parents in the education of their children is emphasised and the school reaches out to serve the educational needs of parents (Murphy 2013).

1.2.2 Admissions Policy

Community National schools are inclusive in their enrolment. Each school serves a defined catchment area and equal access is given to all applicants (Murphy 2013). This is clearly reflected in the Admissions Policy of each school:

The school is committed to a spirit of inclusion, equality and harmony where each child and member of the school community is valued and treated with respect. It is the policy of the school to respect, celebrate and recognise diversity in all areas of human life. Children attending the school will be taught and encouraged to view diversity as something which reflects the community from which the children are drawn. The school will endeavour to encourage the children committed to its care to have a pride in what makes

them different and a belief that difference, when respected and valued, gives strength and vibrancy to the total school community and the wider community in which they live (CNS 2013, p. 1).

Community National schools reflect the range of nationalities and belief systems now existing in Ireland. This is confirmed in the enrolment information from 2016 outlined in Figures 1.1 and 1.2 below (Department of Education and Skills 2016b) where 58% of parents identified as nationalities other than Irish:

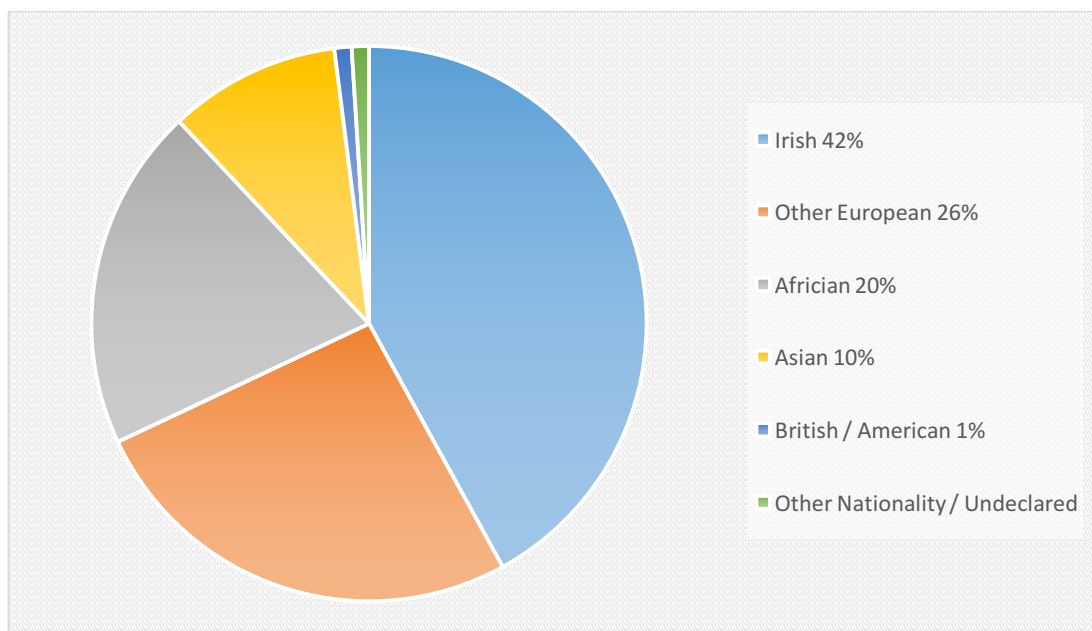


Figure 1.1: Nationality of parents of children attending Community National schools (2016)

It is interesting to note that these figures were more diverse in 2014 when 74% of parents were of a nationality other than Irish. At that time there were seven Community National schools in operation and most of them were in newcomer areas in Leinster. The opening of schools in Greystones (2015), Cork (2014 and 2015) and Kerry (2017) has increased the number of parents of Irish nationality enrolling their children in the schools. The diverse intake of pupils with different beliefs is reflected in Figure 1.2.

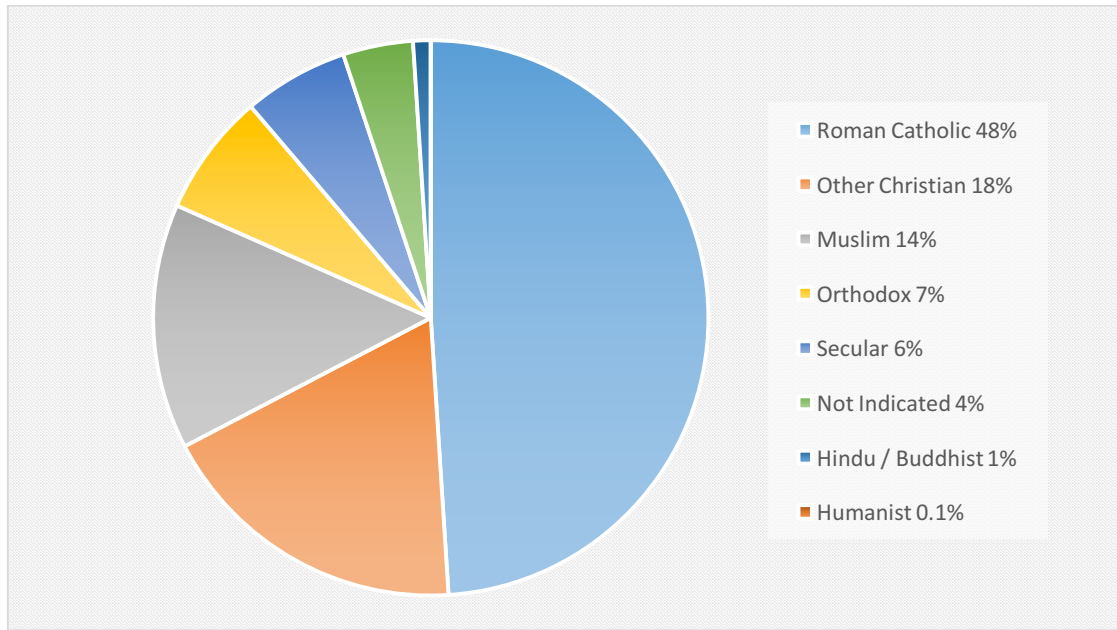


Figure 1.2: Belief systems of children attending Community National schools (2016)

The term ‘Other Christian’ in this chart refers to Church of Ireland, Pentecostal, Presbyterian and Jehovah’s Witnesses. The term ‘secular’, as used here by the Department of Education and Skills, is ascribed to those who declare that they do not belong to any belief group. Whilst Roman Catholic pupils remain the largest single faith group in the schools (48%), other Christian groups make the second-largest faith group (18%) and Muslims (14%) are the third-largest faith group represented.

1.3 Multi-Belief Education: RE in Community National schools

The writing of the religious education programme for Community National schools was originally under the auspices of the Vocational Education Committee (VEC), now known as ETBI. In 2012 the development of the programme was transferred to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The NCCA is the national body charged with responsibility for the development of curricula and assessment in schools. They have taken responsibility for developing an approach to religious education in collaboration with Community National schools.

1.3.1 Goodness Me! Goodness You!

The religious education programme in Community National schools seeks to nurture and support all children in their faith or belief through a common multi-belief programme called '*Goodness Me! Goodness You!*' (GMGY). The writers of GMGY are supported by a group of teacher representatives and a management group who work collaboratively in the production of the programme. A curriculum development and consultation approach has evolved with a wide body of interested partners working collaboratively in partnership with the NCCA (NCCA 2015). Each Community National school has a GMGY coordinator who is experienced in teaching the programme and attends the NCCA network meetings to support the development of the programme.

The programme is provided for all children in a Community National school, regardless of their belief tradition and takes place during the school day. It is being written, taught and reviewed concurrently as the schools evolve. Currently, GMGY has two distinct parts:

- The Junior Programme (Junior Infants – 2nd Class)
- The Senior Curriculum (3rd Class – 6th Class)

The aim of the GMGY programme is to nurture children in living their life to the full in the context of their beliefs and values, fostering respect for others and their beliefs. The programme is based on the experience of the child and helps children to reflect on their experience in a manner that is age appropriate (Murphy 2013). Nurturing the beliefs of all children, in keeping with the faith tradition or belief of their family is one of the founding intentions of the schools:

In many of our new communities, however, there is a need for an additional choice that can accommodate the diverse preferences of parents for varying forms of religious education and faith formation during the school day, in a single school environment that includes and respects children of all religions and none (Hanafin 2007).

GMGY is based on a series of four guiding principles which seek to honour all children, respect all beliefs and espouse all that is positive in multi-belief education:

- Community National schools seek to nurture the development of the whole child, and they value all dimensions of the child's family and community life, including beliefs and religions
- Parents are the primary educators of their children, and families and communities are responsible for passing on traditions, values and faiths/beliefs
- Respect for and celebration of the different faiths/beliefs of children is central to the ethos of a Community National school and this is mirrored in the GMGY programme and the facilitation of inter-faith/belief conversation
- The GMGY programme is developed with school communities in an engagement process with all partners: children, teachers, parents, faith/belief leaders, educationalists

(NCCA 2014)

These principles were informed by the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999), and by *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2009) as well as the *Toledo Principles* (2007) and the evolving ethos of Community National schools (NCCA 2014). They were also informed by the experience of teachers, principals, and single managers of the schools who have been engaging with an increasing range of belief and faith communities in their schools (NCCA 2014).

1.3.2 Delivery of the Multi-Belief Programme

There is a clear distinction between the junior programme and the senior curriculum of GMGY. This study focuses on the junior programme as the senior curriculum was at development stages when the research took place.

In line with the primary school curriculum, thirty minutes per day are assigned to the patron's programme GMGY (NCCA 2015). There are no textbooks. The lessons for the junior programme are provided through the GMGY website in electronic form and are taught with the aid of inter-active whiteboards. The use of this technology facilitates making changes to the programme and the incorporation of illustrations and music into the lessons (Griffin 2011).

Each lesson has a set of clear guidelines for the teacher. For each lesson the teacher is provided with the following:

- An introduction to the lesson
- The thinking that underpins the lesson
- Aims of the lesson
- Curriculum links
- An outline of the different components of a lesson (NCCA 2015).

The aims and learning outcomes of the lessons are shown in two different colour fonts for the teacher. A black font is used to represent the potential learning outcomes for all children in the lesson. A blue font is used to signify the potential learning outcomes relevant to children of a faith tradition. This highlights for the teacher and parents how the lesson can be interpreted by children with a faith background.

The methodology of GMGY is child centred; activity and discovery based, and uses a strong narrative approach (Murphy 2013). There are four core components in GMGY lessons: stories, songs, inter-belief conversation and quiet time. The stories on which the lessons are based portray values such as love, reconciliation, justice and the underlying principle that all beliefs have much in common (NCCA 2015). The stories also explore themes and common experiences such as sharing food, working together and celebrating events: ‘These values and experiences are shared by all, irrespective of their faith/belief tradition. How a child perceives the realities portrayed in the stories will be influenced by her own faith/belief tradition’ (NCCA 2015, p. 5). Songs and poems also are especially composed for children and reflect the theme of the lesson. The practice of Quiet Time is used to conclude some of the GMGY lessons; being still in quiet time reinforces the important life skill of reflection.

1.3.3 Belief Specific Teaching

The GMGY programme has two complementary dimensions. The core programme followed by all children, and belief specific teaching (BST) designed to take account of specific faiths, as well as of belief traditions. The aim is to have children of all beliefs taught together as often as possible, therefore, the core dimension is taught for 80% of the year. The remaining 20% of the year is devoted to belief specific teaching and learning (Murphy 2013; NCCA 2015). For four weeks each year children are differentiated into various belief groups,

namely, Muslim, Christian, Catholic and Humanist/Buddhist/Hindu (HBH) in accordance with the wishes of parents. During these faith specific modules, the beliefs and practices appropriate to the relevant traditions are nurtured (Murphy 2013). The teachers employed in the school teach the belief specific module.

The number of groups and the faith/belief targeted in the groups is proactively managed in each school and reflects the composition of faiths/beliefs in the school and the resources available to each school. The purpose of grouping the children according to their faith/belief traditions is to enable them to engage with the unique aspects of their faith/belief tradition (NCCA 2015a, pp. 5-6).

1.3.4 The Role of Parents

Parents play a key role in the delivery and success of the GMGY programme (Griffin 2011; Murphy 2013; NCCA 2015).

This role is played by extending the child's classroom experience of GMGY into the home and relating it to the family belief perspective. The parent also has a central role to play in nurturing the child's faith/belief through establishing links to the family faith/belief community (NCCA 2015, p. 6).

Parents are recognised as the primary educators of their children and specifically so in terms of faith and belief (Constitution of Ireland, 1937, Art. 42.1). Therefore, they are encouraged to play their essential role of nurturing their child's belief as part of the GMGY programme (NCCA 2015). Each lesson includes an overview for parents that can be downloaded from the GMGY website with a suggested activity that parents can engage in with their child at home while relating the content to their own faith or belief perspective.

1.3.5 GMGY and Sacramental Education

GMGY provides for sacramental education in response to demand from parents and this, up to the time of writing this thesis, has generally happened within the belief specific module. As we have seen in Figure 1.1 and 1.2, as of 2016, Roman Catholic children constitute approximately 48% of the CNS total student cohort (Department of Education and Skills 2016). The term 'sacramental education' is used rather than the traditional 'sacramental preparation' term because it is somewhat narrower than sacramental preparation. Preparation for the sacraments is understood as the role of the parents and the local parish. Sacramental

education within GMGY endeavours to support children's learning in relation to the sacraments. Sacramental preparation can then build on this learning and relate it to the sacrament of First Eucharist or Confirmation. Community National schools facilitate communication between each of these partners in preparing the child for the sacraments (NCCA 2015). As will emerge in the research recounted here, the approach to sacramental education differs in every Community National school depending on the needs of the school community and the practices of the local parish (Conboy 2017).

1.3.6 The Evolution of GMGY

It is important to note that the Community National school model has been developed on a pilot basis in order to learn as much as possible from the group of schools established for this purpose (Griffin 2011). The pilot phase has provided an important learning opportunity and its review will enable informed decisions to be made in relation to the wider use of this model of patronage in the future. The teaching staff and management of the new schools are central to the review process. Their engagement and feedback provide important insights as do those of parents, pupils and the local community, including local faith communities, together with neighbouring schools and other education partners. The practical issues arising in respect of the teaching of religion are an essential element of this. These matters have been carefully monitored and are currently being assessed as part of a review by the NCCA that commenced in September 2017.

Since its inception, GMGY has been subject to regular reviews in the light of experience gained in its delivery and consultation with the educational partners. In 2014, the term *'faith formation'* was replaced by the expression *'belief nurturing'* to encompass children who are not affiliated to a faith tradition. The term 'belief' reflects more accurately the inclusive nature of the programme. The use of the term *'nurture'* instead of *'formation'* captures the potential of the programme to contribute to the fostering of the child's faith or belief (NCCA 2015).

There was strong opposition to the GMGY programme in 2012 from a group of parents in one of the schools, resulting in the suspension of the teaching of the GMGY programme in that school. These parents felt that there was a Christian bias throughout the programme and were concerned that a classroom teacher, rather than a teacher from their

own belief tradition, was teaching their children during the belief specific lessons (Conboy 2016). They set up a formal group that undertook a review of the programme and met with the programme author and Department of Education officials to express their concerns.

The GMGY senior curriculum (3rd – 6th class) was introduced in some Community National schools in 2016 and differs in some ways to the junior programme. It offers more autonomy to classroom teachers by providing a curriculum framework rather than prescribed lessons and a programme. The narrative approach remains as an element of the senior programme but the belief specific teaching is integrated into the core programme rather than separating pupils into specific groups for four weeks every year (NCCA 2016). The senior curriculum covers four strands:

- Story
- We are a Community National School
- Thinking Time
- Beliefs and Religions

Faas, Smith and Darmody (2017a) state that the GMGY senior programme is ‘more accurately described as a values and ethics curriculum rather than religious’ (p. 13).

At the time of writing, it was being reported that there are questions as to whether the belief specific teaching will remain in its current format in the junior curriculum where children separate into their belief groups for four weeks every year. The Minister for Education, on the eve of submission of this thesis, has suggested that dividing pupils into belief specific groupings may cease and sacramental preparation may in future take place after the school day (Donnelly 2017; O’Brien 2017).

1.4 Limitations and De-Limitations

A limitation of this study is that it focuses on the views of principals, parents and the co-ordinators of GMGY in Community National schools. Further ongoing research on the challenges facing classroom teachers, beyond the GMGY co-ordinators, and pupils in Community National schools is recommended.

A de-limitation of this study is that it focuses very specifically on current practice and challenges regarding religious diversity in seven out of the twelve Community National schools. Due to the newness of this school type and the fact that some of the schools have

only opened in the last two years, the criteria for selection for this research in 2016 was that the school needed to be open for at least three years in order to have sufficient insight into the challenges that may arise due to religious diversity.

A further de-limitation of the study is that it focuses on the multi-belief programme, GMGY, in Community National schools from Junior Infants to Third Class. At the time of data collection in 2016 the senior programme was being developed and had changed authors and some new directions were being introduced.

1.5 Structure of Thesis

This chapter has outlined the rationale for, and scope of, this study along with the research aims. It has also provided an outline of the history of Community National schools. Chapter Two explores existing literature pertaining to how education has engaged with religious diversity in Ireland as well as policy recommendations from Europe. It explores the nature of religious education and some of the challenges facing common schooling due to religious diversity. Chapter Three describes the research design considered appropriate for the research. Chapter Four presents the findings of the research and an analysis of the most pertinent challenges facing the schools regarding religious diversity are discussed in Chapter Five. Chapter Six draws some conclusions and suggests recommendations for the stakeholders of Community National schools and offers suggestions for further research.

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter has addressed the rationale, scope and aims of this research and outlined some of the current realities and implications of religious diversity for the Irish education system. An overview of the emergence and development of Community National schools has provided an important understanding of the ethos of these schools and their approach to religious education. The next chapter will explore the literature pertaining to the challenges of religious diversity in education in Ireland and Europe, setting the context within which the research took place.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This literature establishes the ground upon which this research project was undertaken. It begins by reviewing the context and defining key terms that are used throughout the thesis. It presents an overview of how education engages with religious diversity in Ireland as well as outlining relevant policy recommendations from Europe. It explores the nature of religious education in terms of religious freedom and acknowledges different approaches to religious education within which GMGY has been developed. The characteristics of a common school are explored and some of the complex issues that can arise in these environments are discussed.

2.2 Defining Terms

Before proceeding, it is necessary to define the essential terms used throughout this study in order to highlight the complexity of how they are understood and establish clear parameters regarding how they are used in this research. Bertram-Troost (2011) highlights the importance of this to counter the risk of invalid conclusions being drawn when reading and interpreting studies on the impact of religious diversity in education. She states that it is difficult to research the impact of religious diversity in an educational context because no single definition of religious diversity exists. Therefore, ‘one should be very cautious and try to give as clear a stipulative definition as possible depending on the research context which is at stake and on the research questions which are to be answered’ (2011, p. 276). Kieran also cautions that diversity of belief ‘cannot be treated in a monolithic fashion’ (2013, p. 23).

2.2.1 Religious Diversity

The term religious diversity in this research study refers to the variety of religions and beliefs that are currently practiced or affiliated to in the Community National school sector, the diversity that exists within these religions themselves, and the growth in the number of people who are disengaged from the religious tradition they are affiliated to (Barnes 2012). It is also taken to encompass here, people identifying as Humanist or people who do not ascribe to any particular belief system, for example atheists and agnostics (OSCE 2007).

2.2.2 Religious Pluralism

Religious pluralism is identified as a new reality in Ireland that needs to be addressed and catered for by the education system. According to Skeie (2006), the term religious plurality is a descriptive and a normative concept related to religious diversity. Beneke (2007) describes it as religious tolerance of the diversity of religious belief systems co-existing in society. Similarly, Silk (2007) defines religious pluralism as the means by which a country populated with different faiths enables them to co-exist without the persecution of religious minorities. Faas et al (2016) state that the concept of religious pluralism is central to human service professions, including those working in the field of education. Cahill (2009) argues that it is imperative that educators have a good understanding of the major religious traditions as well as an openness and acceptance towards ‘the other’. These concepts of religious pluralism and the skills associated with it are essential to educating children towards building a democratic society in a plural context.

2.2.3 Secularism

It is impossible to examine the role and place of religion in current society without considering secularism (Halsall & Roebben 2010). Issues concerning secularism are often quoted in current educational debates regarding the role of religion in state-funded schools and whether schooling ought be religion-free. The word ‘secular’ referred originally to that which belongs to the world and its affairs (Oxford Dictionary of English 2010). Jackson (2014) makes the important distinction between the terms ‘secular’ and ‘secularist’. He argues that a secular education system may support a form of religious education which allows freedom of religion or belief. ‘This is entirely different from a secularist agenda, which seeks to suppress the study of religion or to interpret religion entirely in a reductionist way’ (p. 28). Secularism properly understood, as opposed to a ‘secularist approach’, recognises and supports the separation of Church and State, without requiring the relegation of religion to a private zone. Nor does it just refer to the decline of religious practice or adherence in modern Ireland. The problematic nature of these terms is often discussed in contemporary discourse on the sociology of religion and in terms of religious education (Taylor 2009; Cush 2013).

Cush (2013) suggests that contemporary societies are both secular and religious in complex and different ways. Bowie et al describe secularism as ‘a changing, complicating religious diversity and plurality, where new religious movements, new traditional religions, and contemporary secular sensibilities mix’ (2012, p. 140). It is evident, therefore, that a variety of perspectives exists within the growing varieties and understandings of secularism (Williams, 2012).

Secularism and pluralism are closely linked. Secularism, in the context of this study, does not refer to the absence of religion. Taylor (2009) argues that while society requires some degree of neutrality and distancing in order for religious pluralism to function, secularism is best defined as an attempt to ‘find fair and harmonious modes of coexistence among religious communities’ (p. xxi) in society. Habermas (2010a) describes this understanding of secularism as ‘post-secularism’. Contemporary secularism, therefore, aims to ensure ‘freedom of both belief and unbelief as well as equality between citizens’ (p. xxii). This understanding is also echoed by Sahgal (2013):

When I say secularism, I do not mean the absence of religion but rather a state structure that defends both freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief, where there is no state religion, where law is not derived from God and where religious actors cannot impose their will on public policy. A secular state does not simply limit religion, it also maintains the essential right of religious freedom as a duty not a favour. This means that it defends the freedom to worship and the right to maintain churches and temples, unhindered, and also defends minorities from attack.

2.2.4 Religious Literacy

Moore (2007) defines religious literacy as the understanding of the basic tenets of the world’s faiths as well as the diversity of expressions that exist within traditions. In the context of this study, it is understood as the capacity of teachers, principals, parents or pupils to articulate the basic tenets of their beliefs in accordance with the appropriate stage of their ability and development. Devitt refers to this as being ‘religiate’; a notion similar to ‘literate’ or ‘numerate’ (2000, p.49). Carr (2007) argues that a form of religious literacy is necessary for social cohesion and should be promoted in common schools ‘not just compatible with but indispensable to liberal education’ (p. 659).

2.2.5 Equality and Equity

It is important in the context of this research to define the difference between the terms equality and equity. They are sometimes used interchangeably but they have different meanings. Equality refers to the promotion of fairness and justice. It can only work if everyone's needs are the same (Clow et al. 2009). The concept of equality in education implies the same opportunities and resources being offered to all children regardless of their race, gender, culture or socio-economic class (Brayboy, Castagno & Maughan 2007; Faas et al. 2017). The term equity suggests seeking to understand and provide people with what they need rather than simply offering the same thing equally to everyone (Clow et al. 2009). In educational terms this involves the distribution of unequal resources or provisions to create systems in schools that have a greater chance of being more equal (Brayboy et al. 2007).

2.3 Policy Developments in Ireland Regarding Religious Diversity

Reviewing religious diversity in Ireland, it is necessary to explore the development of national schooling in the state and to understand how this education system emerged historically. The history and evolution of the Irish education system at primary level has been 'unusual, interesting and complex' (Coolahan 1981, p.141). It is a unique system due to the fact that until the advent of Community National schools in 2008, there were almost no schools at primary level that were directly state-managed.

Religious congregations were central to the establishment and control of primary schools in Ireland since the 19th century and before that in a more informal manner. When the national school system was founded in 1831 the aim of educational policy in Ireland was to establish inter-denominational schools; schools that were under the Patronage of more than one religious community, which were predominantly Catholicism and Protestantism at the time. The Stanley Letter proposed a national school system that offered a common, secular, literary and moral education, but separate religious education. It was intended that the Patron of each school would determine the content and delivery of religious instruction in the schools under their patronage (Hyland 1993; Faas et al. 2015). The national school system, therefore, was envisaged as a multi-denominational or mixed system that would unite children of different religious backgrounds.

However, the main Christian churches at the time did not support the multi-denominational model and each put pressure on the government to provide aid to schools under the management of the individual churches (Akenson 2012). In 1840, state aid was granted to denominational schools, predominantly Roman Catholic, representing a departure from the original multi-denominational vision (Coolahan 1981). After Ireland became an independent state in the early twentieth century, the new Irish state, which was struggling economically and socially, reaffirmed the role of the Catholic church as providers of education and schools (Coolahan 1981; Williams 2005; Anderson et al 2016). By the 1970s, the Irish State had formally recognised the denominational nature of the national school system reinforcing a cooperative relationship between church and state that continues to this day. However, while parents who wished to remove their children from religious instruction could do so, no provision was made for these children while religious instruction was taking place for the children of the patron religion. Nor was anything put in place for parents who wished to send their children to a school that was not denominationally run.

2.3.1 The Emergence of Educate Together Schools

Over a period of time, the lack of provision of multi-denominational schools led to a movement of parents, which developed over time and in 1978 set up Educate Together schools, a patron body focused on responding to parental demand by providing an alternative type of school to the denominational primary school.

Educate Together schools are currently the fastest growing school sector at primary level in Ireland. They are multi-denominational, equality-based schools operating the same National Curriculum as other primary schools. Educate Together schools follow the same Rules for Boards of Management and are staffed by teachers who have the same level of professional qualifications and recognition (Educate Together 2006). There are currently 82 primary schools and 9 second-level Educate Together schools. They are state-funded schools, supported in the same way denominational schools are state-funded. Religious formation does not take place in school time but may be facilitated after school for the children of parents who wish to organise it. Approximately half of the pupils in Educate Together schools are from Roman Catholic backgrounds. They are offered the option to organise sacramental preparation classes in the school after school hours.

In terms of ethos, Educate Together have recently adopted the term ‘equality-based’ in preference to multi-denominational. They are co-educational, child-centred and democratically run and all religions and beliefs are guaranteed equality of esteem. Children from all backgrounds and beliefs are carefully nurtured and taught to interact with different viewpoints in an atmosphere of equal respect (Educate Together 2006). The patron’s programme in the Educate Together model is an ethical education curriculum called ‘Learn Together’, divided each year into four strand units:

- Moral and Spiritual Development
- Equality and Justice
- Belief Systems
- Ethics and the Environment

The students learn about various religious traditions and practices. The acknowledgement of different religious festivals is encouraged during the school day throughout the year. The curriculum was introduced to schools in 2004 in response to the legal requirement that a form of religious instruction must be taught during the school day (Rules for National Schools 1965). The parents and teachers who founded Educate Together schools in the 1970s had originally wished to establish a programme that would allow children from different religious backgrounds to have access to specific forms of religious education in accordance with their own beliefs, but this approach was eventually abandoned due to practical difficulties and ethical objections (Educate Together 2016).

It quickly became apparent that it would be all but impossible to afford all children equal forms of religious education that would align with their parents’ convictions, and this within school hours. Such a scheme would also have amounted to segregating the children according to religious affiliation, which was contrary to the very spirit of these new schools.
(Fischer 2016, p. 99)

2.3.2 Community National Schools and the Church

Community National schools have also attempted a similar approach to religious education to that originally tried by Educate Together by seeking to nurture the beliefs of all children within the school day. In 2012, RTE’s education and science correspondent Emma O’ Kelly

researched the establishment of Community National schools by gaining access to Department of Education documents and minutes of meetings through Freedom of Information legislation. These documents revealed that the Catholic bishops, in return for their support for Community National schools, required faith formation to be provided during the school day for Catholic students, which would in turn allow Catholic students to prepare for the sacraments of Reconciliation, First Communion and Confirmation during school-time. This was described by Church officials as ‘a minimum non-negotiable requirement’ (O’Kelly 2012) and was significant in establishing the belief specific teaching within the multi-belief programme that was developed.

Despite the fact that this model did not succeed in Educate Together schools decades before, the government gave assurances to the Catholic bishops that Community National schools would provide faith formation during the school day and seek to do so for each of the main religious groups represented (Edwards 2007). Even though concerns were expressed by other religious leaders from the Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church stating that separating Catholic children for religious education dilutes the inclusive ethos of the Community National schools the policy still remains (O’Kelly 2012). Discussion on the nature and teaching of the multi-belief programme being provided in these new schools continues (Hyland and Bocking 2015) and a discussion of the findings from this research will be presented in Chapter Five.

2.3.3 The Irish State and Religious Identity

This on-going discussion brings into focus the emphasis placed by the Irish State on religious identity. Roman Catholicism has been tightly woven into the fabric of Irish culture and education for centuries and this brings a level of complexity to the growing diversity and changing landscape in Ireland (Anderson et al. 2016). Religious Education has played a central role in primary schooling in Ireland since the foundation of the primary school system. In the *Rules for National Schools*, Rule 68 stated that:

Of all parts of a school curriculum Religious Instruction is by far the most important. Religious instruction is a fundamental part of the school course, and a religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school (Department of Education 1965).

However, this Rule was rescinded by Minister for Education, Jan O' Sullivan in January 2016. Although the Rules required that all schools provide a programme of religious instruction, the responsibility for this was assigned by the state to the school patron and government guidelines recommended that thirty minutes a day should be spent on the teaching of the subject. In the 90% of schools under Roman Catholic patronage, Catholic faith formation is provided for Catholic pupils and preparation for the sacraments of Reconciliation, First Communion and Confirmation takes place within school hours. It is important to note, however, that the Irish Catholic Bishops clarified in their 2010 National Catechetical Directory 'Share the Good News' that religious education and faith formation initiatives in Catholic schools are provided for Catholic pupils as a *support* for families and parishes and not as a way of replacing their responsibilities (Irish Episcopal Conference 2010).

The Education Act of 1998 removed the prohibition on state involvement in religious education, allowing for a greater focus on the role of the state in responding to growing religious pluralism in society. This marked a departure in understanding religious learning and teaching as an ecclesial task (Anderson et al. 2016; Williams, 2005).

In the 1999 primary-school curriculum 'the spiritual dimension' is a key concept of central importance. This is justified in the curriculum which states that 'its religious and cultural expression is an inextricable part of Irish culture and history' (Department of Education 1999, p.58). This leaves no doubt that primary schools in Ireland are expected to continue to play an important role in the religious formation of students, even though it does not recommend any particular religion (Fischer 2016).

The 1999 curriculum states that children should be able to:

- acquire sensitivity to the spiritual dimension of life;
- develop the capacity to make ethical judgements informed by the tradition and ethos of the school;
- develop a knowledge and understanding of his or her own religious traditions and beliefs, with respect for the religious traditions and beliefs of others.

(Department of Education 1999, p.36)

The 1999 curriculum in turn, clearly seeks to express a spirit of openness and respect that is now reflected in Irish society. However, Fischer argues that the 1999 curriculum makes the assumption that all primary-school children have religious traditions and beliefs and that these are in line with the ethos of their school (Fischer 2016).

Essentially, the Irish Constitution clearly asserts that the state should respect religious affiliation and primary education in Ireland plays a role in promoting religion and the development of religious identity in children. Considering the fact that 96% of primary schools in Ireland are managed by religious patrons and there are a limited number of multi-denominational schools in Ireland, there are a considerable number of students attending their local primary school who are not affiliated to the ethos of that school. Research over the last decade has also indicated that, while primary schools with a religious ethos have been welcoming and accommodating to children of different beliefs in general terms, the school ethos and curriculum does not sufficiently address their religious needs (Devine 2011; Parker-Jenkins and Masterson 2013; Smyth, Lyons and Darmody 2013). Irwin (2009) contends that children who are not educated in an environment that does not fully recognise their identity can suffer long-term damage and he describes this as a form of oppression.

Increasing international pressure has been brought on the Irish education system due to the lack of balance in the configuration of the primary school system and the lack of equity between religious and non-religious groups. In 2011 the Irish Human Rights Commission (IHRC) stated:

...the overarching recommendation of the IHRC is that the state should ensure that there is diversity of provision of school type within educational catchment areas throughout the state which reflects the diversity of religious and non-religious conviction now represented in the State.
(2011, p.2)

This created further impetus for this discussion placing pressure on the Irish government to address the lack of diversity of provision for parents who want to have a right to exercise freedom of religion and belief in their selection of schools recognised by the state. Whether all parents can expect to have the right to choose the type of school they want to send their children to depends too on what schools can emerge and what can be financially supported by the state.

2.3.4 The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector

In 2007 in response to the changing demographics of Irish society, the Archbishop of Dublin Diarmuid Martin and the Irish Bishops indicated a willingness to divest themselves of patronage of some of their primary schools in order to facilitate more choice for parents who would prefer alternative forms of patronage for their child's schooling (Lane 2013). However, it wasn't until March 2011 that the Minister for Education, Ruairi Quinn, initiated a Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector to establish greater diversity of school provision in a more pluralist Ireland. The Forum's report, published in April 2012, observed that there was a 'mismatch' between the inherited denominational school patronage model and the rights of citizens in a more culturally and religiously diverse contemporary Irish society (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather 2012).

The report has had considerable significance for primary schools and the approach to teaching religion in Ireland. It highlights a number of central issues including (i) the need for divestment of patronage of some schools by the Catholic Church, (ii) the need to ensure that schools, particularly Stand Alone schools in rural areas are as inclusive as possible and accommodate pupils of various belief systems, (iii) the need to deal effectively with the Constitutional right to opt out of religious education, (iv) the need to have school policies on the conduct of religious and cultural celebrations in schools, and (v) ensuring that the Boards of Management of denominational schools reflect the diversity of the local community (McGrady 2014).

The Forum report also made a significant recommendation regarding the teaching of religious education in primary schools. It proposes the teaching of Education About Religions and Beliefs and Ethics (ERBE) for all children to ensure that they all receive education about religions and beliefs. The Forum report was clear that it is not intended that this subject would replace the patron's religious education programme but would aim to expose children to the plurality of faiths and beliefs in Irish society. An ERBE framework is still in its early stages and is being written by the NCCA (NCCA 2016). Fischer raises questions as to how the state will be able '...to reconcile a more neutral approach to religion in this course with the still valid frameworks of the 1999 curriculum and of the 1998 Education Act giving official recognition and priority to the school patron's ethos' (2016, p. 85). ERB and Ethics proposes a pedagogical approach that introduces students to learning

about religion and beliefs through the lens of cultural heritage as a way of understanding and respecting different religious perspectives. As Fischer suggests, this will be a challenge to denominational schools in Ireland in how they approach faith formation as well as ERB and Ethics. These questions are also highlighted in the 2017 Report on the Consultation on ERB and Ethics (NCCA 2017).

This brings into focus the different perspectives on the aims of religious education that exist in Ireland and internationally. Mercer and Roebben suggest that the role of religious education, even in denominational schools has to be ‘redefined and re-justified within the boundaries of the modern school...with its multi-religious context and its own didactics’ (2007, p. 447). Furthermore, Cush posits that another name for what we now call ‘religious education’ may be required (2013).

2.4 The Nature of Religious Education

This brings us to the question of the nature of religious education in pluralist, secular contexts. The teaching of religion in Ireland has become a matter of intensifying debate in recent times, not just in the Irish context, but throughout Europe. McGrady (2013) and Jackson (2004) also rightly acknowledge that there is need for clarity regarding the language and terms used when referring to religious education in Ireland and in European contexts. Historically in Ireland the term ‘religious instruction’ has been used in the constitution and legal documents. Religious instruction refers to:

...the educating ‘into’ religion structured as a timetabled subject in which pupils of a particular religious faith or tradition are brought together separately from other pupils in the school ... and are offered a programme based upon a curriculum defined by the relevant religious authority of their faith tradition and inspected by that authority (McGrady 2013, p. 81).

The existence of the terms religious education and religious instruction creates complexity in the argument in education today. The terms are not interchangeable and can mean quite different things. Legislative documents referring to public schools in Ireland clearly refer to ‘religious instruction’ taking place during the school day. A growing effort to define religious education internationally has impacted on Ireland too. Religious education implies a broader approach and is not defined within a particular religious tradition. It can be

focused on a more phenomenological approach to education *about* religions. It can also include learning from religion and belief (Byrne 2013).

Religious education may be the preferred term today but McGrady affirms that ‘while the term ‘religious instruction’ may no longer be the preferred term among such educators it does have legal and constitutional currency’ (2013, p. 81). This clearly points to the need for legislation regarding religious instruction in publically-funded state schools to be reviewed and re-written in light of the current realities and social fabric of a pluralistic Ireland.

2.4.1 The Contribution of Religious Education to Religious Freedom

In reality, public schools in Europe, generally employ the term ‘religious education’. It is a subject that is believed to have potential to promote democratic citizenship, the common good and mutual understanding (Council of Europe 2006). Habermas (2010a) argues that liberal democracies are in the process of moving from being secular societies to becoming post-secular societies where religions must be recognised and given a voice in the public sphere. However, religions are inherently plural and complex and religious adherents do not speak with one voice. With the advent of this plurality, Ireland has become increasingly aware of the human rights frame of reference regarding religious education and the concept of religious freedom. Freedom of religion relates to both freedom ‘for’ religion and freedom ‘from’ religion (McGrady 2013). There has been a growing awareness that both must be acknowledged and accommodated within any and every approach to teaching religion (McGrady 2014).

MacDonald maintains that faith is central to the identity construction of students from faith communities and the argument that there should be no relationship between religion and schooling is in ‘itself the manifestation of a faith position, namely the belief in the absence of a deity’ (2012, p. 130). The removal of religion from schools would create ‘a significant cultural vacuum’ (MacDonald p. 143). O’Toole (2015) on the other hand argues that state managed schools in Ireland ought to be non-denominational, secular schools as this is the only way schools can be inclusive and egalitarian. She argues that faith formation belongs to the private domain of parents and communities.

The key consideration for educationalists, according to MacDonald (2012), is the issue of social justice and inclusion. She suggests that students can experience marginalisation as a result of their faith or 'non-faith' position and this can in turn create barriers to participation in learning. 'Just as non-religious pupils may be marginalised by religious practices in schools, so might pupils from faith backgrounds be marginalised by secular-normative schooling' (2012, p.143). Van Nieuwenhove supports this view stating that there is no neutral position. The non-denominational perspective is '...not a neutral meta-perspective; it is just as biased as any of the denominational perspectives' (2013, p.199). Human rights and religious freedom, therefore, recognises the right to practice one's religion and not be discriminated against on the grounds of religion. Schuller argues that schools and religious education requires 'a new understanding of religious convictions as something more and something other than mere relics of a past with which we are finished' (2005, p. 12).

2.4.2 Approaches to Religious Education

Hull acknowledges that it is difficult to formulate a global perspective on an approach to religious education as this varies according to different countries. He identifies four factors that can influence the approach to religious education in state schools:

1. The religious affiliation of the society, whether mono-religious or multi-religious;
2. The relationship between the religious and the secular within each country;
3. The historical tradition of each country;
4. Conceptions about the nature and purpose of state school religious education.

(Hull 2001, p.1)

Drawing on the work of Grimmitt (2000), Hull draws a distinction between 'learning religion', 'learning about religion' and 'learning from religion.' 'Learning religion', as he sees it, is confessional in nature; teachers are expected to be believers in the faith perspective being taught and the purpose of the instruction is to deepen the commitment of the students to the one faith. This approach to religious education has been adopted in denominational schools in Ireland but is also being challenged, in practice, by the reality of pluralism.

'Learning about religion', Hull explains, involves the teaching of religion in a more objective, descriptive way. No particular faith tradition is promoted and the emphasis is on

the learning of content. The secular, human rights stance regarding religious education supports this approach, arguing that religious education should be taught in a ‘critical, objective and pluralistic way about the different beliefs that different people have about gods, and leaves it up to parents and churches to teach specific religious beliefs outside of school hours’ (Nugent and Donnelly 2013, p. 188). Hull acknowledges the value of this approach and the significant role it plays in preventing religious intolerance. He emphasises that ‘it empowers the student with critical skills for interpreting religious phenomena; it tends to release students from unexamined beliefs and helps them to break down the stereotypes of other religious traditions’ (Hull 2001, p.3).

However, Jackson (2004) suggests that religious education supported by the state needs to go beyond merely teaching ‘about’ religions. The Interpretive Approach designed by Jackson (1997) also encourages reflexivity and edification. Students need opportunities to reflect on their own beliefs and engage in ‘sensitive, well-informed critique’ (2013b, p. 45). Edification requires a capacity for students to consider aspects of their own as well as peer assumptions about their beliefs, assisting them to clarify and develop their own views. This is similar to and brings us to a third approach to religious education outlined by Hull; ‘learning from religion’.

‘Learning from religion’ encourages the engagement of students in the beliefs and practices of the religions being studied. The focus is on the students as learners and pedagogical approaches such as distancing and simulation are effective methodologies to promote this approach to learning (Council of Europe 2007). Dillon states that ‘the risk of missing the life experiences of children and young people is very real, therefore limiting the impact of education in Religious Education on the values and attitudes they form’ (Dillon 2013, p. 72). Hull believes the value of this approach lies in the fact that students move away from ‘...the domestic concerns of the religious communities, and the internal questions about the best way to study religion, into the wider issues with which government and the community at large are rightly concerned’ (Hull 2001, p. 5), namely social cohesiveness, tolerance and the common good. Kieran (2013) argues that religious education in contemporary Ireland presents an opportunity for children to learn *about* and *from* various beliefs that are different from their own while simultaneously cultivating their own belief perspective.

2.4.3 Multi-Belief Education

Community National schools and the GMGY multi-belief programme acknowledge that faith contributes to children's sense of identity and belonging as citizens, just as beliefs that make no reference to religion contribute to the identity and belonging of other children (NCCA 2015). This emphasis on identity and belonging is also highlighted by Kitching and Shanneik (2015) in their 'Making Communion' study. The GMGY programme has recently been described as a multi-belief and values education programme rather than religious education: 'It is a belief-nurturing programme where children, with the help of their teacher, parents and belief communities learn more about their own beliefs and those of their friends' (Conboy 2017, p. 4). Inter-belief conversation is central to this process. One of the Guiding Principles of the GMGY programme in Community National schools is:

Respect for and celebration of the different beliefs of children...and the facilitation of inter-faith/belief conversation. The programme aims to contribute to the development of Ireland as a pluralist society based on an appreciation of the value of different languages, cultures, ethnicities, religions and belief systems, and of the interaction between them.
(NCCA 2015, p. 12)

A recent study was carried out in Community National schools and has resulted in two papers; one on the ethos and practice of the schools (Faas, Smith and Darmody 2017a) and the other on the agency of children in the GMGY programme (Faas, Smith and Darmody 2017b). The authors (2017a) state that Community National schools use 'a reflective approach and encourages dialogue between children. Rather than relying on textbooks, there are a number of resources to draw upon including children's own stories' (p. 24). Jackson (2004) argues for the importance of inter-faith dialogue and children's agency. He believes that children's 'religio-cultural identities' are fostered through interaction with others in relation to their own beliefs and values. He suggests that participation in inter-religious dialogue has the potential to challenge as well as affirm children's belief identities. However, Van Nieuwenhove (2013) emphasises the importance of children being 'steeped' in their own tradition or belief system before they can 'engage in respectful and tolerant dialogue with people of different traditions' (p. 196). This reinforces the belief specific teaching element of the GMGY programme which seeks to nurture the belief-identities of the children.

Cullen (2006) critiques the use of the term ‘dialogue’ in relation to religious education with children and young people. She highlights the complexity of the term inter-religious dialogue and questions whether it is beyond the capacity of schools to engage in this task with children. Donnelly (2003) states that inter-belief dialogue requires a sophisticated owning of and critique of one’s own tradition and perspective as well as a mature tolerance for the other. Cullen argues that the term ‘conversation’ is more appropriate in terms of what actually happens in classrooms when children engage with one another around issues of belief. ‘Conversation breaks down barriers as it is about swapping the small details and sharing the small intimacies of everyday living, allowing us glimpses into the life of another person’ (Cullen 2006, p. 994).

Oduntan (2012) also makes a distinction between multi-religious education and inter-religious education. He describes multi-religious education in terms of a phenomenological approach, which seeks to present all beliefs represented in society to children in school. They learn *about* the various beliefs but faith formation is the responsibility of the home and community of worship that the child belongs to. Inter-religious education, on the other hand, also presents the various beliefs in society to the children in school but goes further by encouraging interfaith dialogue among the children. This would suggest that the GMGY programme would be more appropriately described as an inter-belief programme rather than a multi-belief programme as inter-belief conversation is a core component of the programme.

However, the junior GMGY programme does not entirely fit into this category either. It adopts a hybrid approach. GMGY fundamentally employs a narrative approach to religious education. It places a strong emphasis on the agency of the child in the construction of knowledge rather than employing a ‘transmissionist model’ of RE (Wardekker and Miedema, 2001). The junior programme does not explicitly explore content about the various beliefs unless the children speak about their beliefs in the class. Jackson (2004) describes this as a postmodernist approach and states that there have been few attempts to do this in religious education. This approach does not present the ‘grand narratives’ of religious traditions in a formal curriculum to the children. Rather, it emphasises the life experience and related questions of the young person (Wardekker and Miedema 2001).

The GMGY programme seeks to offer children the opportunity to explore self, other, world and the inter-relatedness of all three (NCCA 2014b). At the centre of every lesson is a children's story. Each story has a central theme that seeks to explore the life and experience of the child, for example, friendship, forgiveness, difference. Through conversation about these stories the children are helped to understand their life as lived and experienced by them at a deeper level. The programme writers describe its approach in the following way:

GMGY cultivates this ground of the child's experience by 'tending it' with an educational process involving story, reflection, conversation, song, activity, media, silence and stillness. In cultivating the ground of the child's experience GMGY hopes to enhance his or her human flourishing; it seeks to help each child to 'blossom'. Children are not passive in this process; they are interactive with it.

(NCCA 2014b, p.6)

This pedagogical approach appropriately reflects Fowler's stages of children's faith development (Fowler 1981). He posits that children between the ages of three to seven engage most effectively with their faith through fantasy and imaginative interaction. The importance of the creation of a 'safe space' in the classroom for children to explore their values and beliefs through reflection and conversation is also essential (O'Shúilleabháin 2004; Council of Europe 2007; Jackson 2014).

Faith formation does not take place during the lessons in the GMGY core programme. The agency given to the child is described in the following way; 'Children of a faith tradition bring this faith-context to the lessons. The lessons do not dictate that they do so but when they do, lessons have the capacity to host the child's faith-based context' (NCCA 2014b, p. 5). In the belief-specific lessons:

Children are, as far as possible, grouped according to their faith or belief tradition, and lesson content...specifically nurtures the child's faith or belief by making explicit reference to the teachings of the tradition in which the child's spiritual life and humanity will blossom.

(NCCA 2014b, p. 4 - 6)

Erricker and Erricker (2000) are strong proponents of a similar postmodern approach. Their focus is entirely on the children and their moral, spiritual and emotional needs rather than on a prescribed curriculum that 'delivers' knowledge to the children. Their approach centres

around the personal narratives of the children and the nurturing of their creativity and imagination. Teachers are therefore facilitators of the children's construction of their own knowledge. They argue that any religious education that provides information through a prescribed curriculum is providing children with a pre-packaged construction of knowledge rather than allowing children to use their own imaginations to construct their own knowledge. They also point out that a transmissionist approach favours the religious over the secular and undermines children who are not part of a faith tradition. Jackson's description of the Erricker's approach echoes strongly with the approach taken by the GMGY programme:

It can only be done by listening to and responding to the 'small narratives' of other individuals, whether these 'texts' be personal stories of other children, works of art or whatever. The point is that no interpretation must be imposed on the material. The children must construct the knowledge themselves. The teacher's role is to facilitate this process. (Jackson 2004, p. 63)

Jackson (2004) argues that despite the attraction of this 'transactional approach', it is a relativistic approach and problems arise in the accommodation of children who hold fundamental religious beliefs. Kieran describes belief, in its broadest sense as 'a firmly held conviction or acceptance that something is true' (2003, p. 23). Ipgrave (1999, 2001) found in her research on inter-religious dialogue in primary education that many children in her study consider their beliefs to be true. Kieran also asserts that belief consists of more than a cognitive dimension and impacts on 'ethical, ritual, affective, physical and spiritual dimensions of life' (2003, p. 23). Jackson (2004) therefore contends that issues will arise with a relativistic pedagogy for children who are grounded in a faith tradition at home and in their community of practice. Revell (2009) also highlighted that the teaching of Islam can be particularly challenging for teachers who adopt an open-enquiry approach to religious education.

The junior GMGY programme is unique in its approach to religious education. It does not seek to learn *about* religion but does foster learning *from* and *into* religion through creating a safe space for inter-belief conversation and modules on belief-specific teaching. GMGY's pedagogy adopts aspects of the postmodernist relativist approach but it also seeks to offer belief nurturing to the plurality of beliefs in the schools through the belief specific teaching component.

2.4.4 Critical Perspectives of the Multi-Belief Approach

This pluralist approach to religious education is not without its critics. Van Nieuwenhove (2013) believes that a system that invites everyone to celebrate diversity and difference and view one another as equal is philosophically incoherent.

The pluralist paradigm is a purely formal one since it does not have any content, and is actually parasitic upon the other world views (which make specific and content-driven claims about the world). As a consequence of this formal nature it is always in danger of lapsing (implicitly) into a non-denominational perspective (2013, p. 196).

He goes on to assert that while the so called multi-denominational, pluralist approach may seem attractive and inclusive in a more diverse Ireland, ‘the celebration of difference makes all religions, in the end, a matter of indifference’ (p. 197) and will inevitably fail. A pluralist position, according to Van Nieuwenhove, is a form of agnosticism; it is a ‘commitment to non-commitment’ (p. 198) and can ‘effectively erase references to Christianity from the public square’ (p. 197) in an attempt to be inclusive and neutral.

Educate Together has taken a strong stance against the GMGY multi-belief programme (2016). They assert that to separate children for belief-specific lessons is highly questionable both legally and morally:

This raises serious legal difficulties for a State body, which must fully comply with our current equality legislation and constitutional obligations in relation to religious discrimination. If such practices are allowed, these schools will be the only part of our State services in which separate treatment according to religion is permitted (Educate Together 2016, p. 5).

They go on to argue that ‘separate can never be equal’ (p. 7) and from an educational perspective, it is not desirable to emphasise the religious differences of young children in a classroom when they are learning about socialisation and how to socialise.

Nugent and Donnelly (2013) also argue that only knowledge ‘about’ religions and beliefs should be taught in state-managed schools. Children of an Atheistic or Humanist conviction should not be exposed or drawn into meaningful engagement with people’s personal experiences of religion and faith. They consider this to be a form of proselytism. Byrne, however, questions whether ‘a right to be free from the need for dialogue with others

in their beliefs could actually undermine freedom and mitigate against the search for tolerance, respect and mutual care' (2013, p. 210). Kieran also points out that there has been a tendency in Ireland 'to engage in a bipolar debate about religion in society and Religious Education in schools without appreciating the full complexity and nuance of the issues' (2013, p. 27). Furthermore, Lane (2013) argues that a religion or an educational programme in today's society that does not recognise pluralism has its head in the sand.

2.5 Religious Pluralism and Policy Development in Education in Europe

At this point, it is useful to explore educational policies and practices in Europe towards religious pluralism in education. The debate regarding the relationship between religion and education in schools is a topic which is contested throughout Europe. The significance of religion and its role and value in society differs across Europe and different educational systems offer different approaches to the teaching of religion. Denominational schools are a common feature in many European countries and religion remains strongly influential (Faas et al. 2016). For the purpose of this literature review however, significant developments in the area of religious diversity in public rather than denominational education across Europe will be the focus. While there are a diversity of views about the place of religion in schools in Europe, there is also a consensus emerging on some principles that may guide the debate (Byrne 2013).

2.5.1 The Council of Europe

Following the 9/11 terrorist attack in New York in 2001, a priority was given by the Council of Europe to the role of religion in the public square and the promotion of religious education as a means to protect human rights, promote democracy and help build cohesive societies. The first project in 2002 *The New Challenge of Intercultural Education: Religious Diversity and Dialogue in Europe* focused on the relationship of religion with culture. It concluded that 'regardless of the truth or falsity of religious claims, religion is a part of life and culture and therefore should be understood by all citizens as part of their education' (Jackson 2012, p. 170). The Council went on to publish two reference books for public schools in Europe; *The Religious Dimension of Intercultural Education* (2005) and *Religious Diversity and Intercultural Education* (2007). In 2008 a set of recommendations on teaching religious and

non-religious beliefs within intercultural education were published for governments, policy-makers and educators. The recommendations are as follows:

- i. Intercultural dialogue is a pre-condition for the development of tolerance in Europe;
- ii. There should be respect for the rights of individuals to hold particular religious beliefs;
- iii. Teaching about religious and non-religious convictions is consistent with the aims of education for a democratic citizenship;
- iv. Promoting dialogue between people from different cultural, religious and non-religious convictions is important in schooling;
- v. Respecting the dignity of everyone and promoting mutual trust and understanding is important for education in the twenty-first century. (Council of Europe 2008).

Essentially, the Council is emphasising that learning *about* religions and learning *from* religious diversity through dialogue is a necessity for a democratic, cohesive Europe that protects human rights. Following the 2008 recommendations another publication, *Signposts: Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-Religious Worldviews in Intercultural Education* (Jackson 2014) was produced by the Council of Europe. This document is for policy-makers, schools and teacher-educators to specifically address the issues that may arise in schools and colleges. It suggests tools and didactical approaches to managing challenges that may arise. One of these challenges is the integration of non-religious convictions or beliefs with studies of religious beliefs. A further publication by the Council was produced in 2016, *Competences for Democratic Culture*, for policy-makers and educational practitioners. It provides a model for developing competences for citizens to participate effectively in a democratic society. The model can be used to assist the development of curriculum, the design of pedagogies and new forms of assessment.

2.5.2 The Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs

Simultaneously, in 2007, a team of international lawyers, educators and social scientists gathered to work on the formulation of international guiding principles for teaching about religions and beliefs in public schools. Its concern was to consider the place of the study of religions and beliefs, including non-religious worldviews, in public education. The result was

the production of the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools*, named after the city in which the drafting team first worked on the text (OSCE 2007). The writers chosen were picked for their particular expertise, not as representatives of different religions or worldviews. However, they happened to be from a cross section of religious and philosophical backgrounds (Jackson, 2013).

The primary goal of the Toledo Guiding Principles is to assist in the promotion of the study of religions and beliefs in public schooling and third level institutions. They offer criteria and recommendations that need to be considered when teaching about religions and beliefs and argue that these have human rights implications and must be heeded by all stakeholders in public education. They seek to increase understanding of the growing variety of religious and philosophical beliefs in society and the renewed visibility of religion in the public square. The guiding principles argue that there is value in an education that holds at its core a respect for everyone's right to freedom of religion and belief. This in turn increases cohesion in society and tolerance for the plural nature of society today (OSCE 2007).

These recommendations and guiding principles represent the views of policy-makers, lawyers and educators but do not include the views of students.

2.5.3 The REDCo Research Project

The REDCo research project explored the subject of young people and religion in European countries between 2006 and 2009. It sought to gain an insight into how students from eight European countries, between the ages of 14-16 years, see the relevance or irrelevance of religion in their daily lives, in the school environment, and in society as a whole.

Overall, the respondents of the study were clearly aware of the diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews that exist in society. The majority of the students in the study agree that religious education should be taught in schools (REDCo 2009). Those that disagreed were in the minority and largely regarded religious education as boring or irrelevant. Interestingly, there was also a majority consensus that religious education was an important subject to study but that school was not the place for religious practice (Knauth et al. 2011).

While acknowledging contextual differences between and within the participant countries, Jackson (2011) summarises the REDCo findings as including the following:

- Students wish for peaceful coexistence across differences, and believe this to be possible;
- For students peaceful coexistence depends on knowledge about each other's religions and worldviews and sharing common interests as well as doing things together;
- Students who learn about religious diversity in school are more willing to have conversations about religions/beliefs with students of other backgrounds than those who do not;
- Students wish to avoid conflict: some of the religiously committed students feel vulnerable;
- Students want learning to take place in a safe classroom environment where there are agreed procedures for expression and discussion;
- Most students would like the state-funded school to be a place for learning *about* different religions/worldviews, rather than for instruction *into* a particular religion/worldview.

This research with young people and the policy developments from Europe over the last ten years clearly emphasise the importance of religious education in public schooling. It is interesting that the emphasis is primarily on learning *about* religions and inter-religious dialogue.

2.6 The Common School - Characteristics of Community National schools

An examination of the concept of public schooling and how it caters for religious diversity will now be explored. Internationally, schools that are not denominational schools are known as 'common schools' (Alexander and McLaughlin 2003). A common school is a school that is open to all citizens regardless of beliefs, with entry to the school being totally non-restrictive in respect of parental background or beliefs (Williams 2010). Alexander and McLaughlin define the common school as 'a school that is open to, and intended for, all students in a liberal, democratic society regardless of religious, ethnic, class or cultural background' (2003, p. 364). According to Williams (2010), the common school is also known as a public, state or community school. Therefore, Community National schools in Ireland

can be described as common schools. Their purpose is to provide an inclusive, common education based on the values that are essential to the functioning of a modern liberal democracy and hence acceptable to all members of a society.

Halstead (2007) describes four characteristics of common schools that correlate with the ethos of Community National schools. Firstly, common schools educate all children together, regardless of their ethnicity, home language or religion. This recognises the children's common humanity and equal rights to respect and recognition. Secondly, Halstead suggests that common schools serve a liberal, democratic state by developing the children's commitment to shared values of justice, equality and rationality. Thirdly, common schools provide equal educational experiences for children regardless of their race, gender, nationality, social class, sexuality, religion or home language. Finally, the common school fosters respect for difference and prepares children for life in a plural, multicultural society.

2.6.1 Inclusive and Secular Common Schools

McLaughlin (1995) makes a distinction between two models of common schools; an inclusive common school and a secular common school. An inclusive common school teaches about religions but does not hold any particular belief as truth. This would be the approach of common schools in the UK and many European countries. A secular common school does not teach any form of religious education. This is the approach taken in France and the USA where the separation of Church and State in their constitutions is translated in educational terms as the absence of religious education in schools.

Brighouse (2006, 2009) suggests that secular common schools, although based on liberal democratic principles, have lost their values and lost their way. Jackson (2004) argues that common schools should be inclusive schools and a 'genuine forum for dialogue between students and teachers from different religious and non-religious backgrounds and for learning the skills to interpret, reflect upon and gain insight from different worldviews' (p. 167). An inclusive school should be a microcosm of a democratic society, encouraging the exploration of ideas, engagement with 'the other' and reflection upon different perspectives rather than a school that holds one particular worldview, a secularist one, that educates solely for citizenship. Valk (2007) argues that schools have a duty to educate for citizenship and social responsibility but requires '...more than steeping students in a generic set of core values'

(p.283). Educating about worldviews, both religious and secular, is important and Valk suggests that developing a sense of moral vision and values is the new challenge.

Fielding and Moss (2011) more recently argued for the reformation of the common school into something more radical, enabling it to be a community for understanding in an increasingly challenging post-secular environment. Boeve describes post-secular society as one in which ‘religion has not been banished; rather, it has again received a prominent place on the agenda, in Europe as well as in the world as a whole’ (2007, p. 14). Watson (2013) suggests that post-secular society involves a new diversity of spiritual and non-religious worldviews existing on a level playing field where there is less control than in the past by religious authority. This is also the landscape reflected in Community National schools, bringing to the fore unique challenges that face the common school regarding religious diversity.

2.7 Some Challenges of Religious Diversity to the Common School

Fielding and Moss (2011) argue that common schools need to be places that seek to reconcile people and ways of life, honouring conflicting values and promoting a life in common. This however can be a challenging task for schools and raises issues for families from minority beliefs. One of the key areas of challenge to a life in common in education is how schools manage the different values of different minority groups. Key issues that arose in the literature are the particular challenges that arise for Jehovah’s Witnesses and Muslim students and their families.

2.7.1 Managing Minority Groups with Different Values

Hamzeh and Oliver (2012) caution about categorising Muslim students into one group, namely a ‘minority group’ by virtue of their ‘muslimness’. They are not necessarily a homogenous group. It is important to recognise that there are pupils who may identify as Muslim or Arab who may not be religious at all. This can be true of any faith group; one size does not fit all. There are subtle and complicated ways of living one’s religion in different contexts.

According to Sarwar (1992), Islam is an all-encompassing faith which provides guidance for all dimensions of life. Therefore, aspects of how curriculum is taught in Europe

and our approach in schools around knowledge acquisition, can be difficult for some Muslims. For example, western views on science and technology are considered by many Muslims to be from a secular stance.

Muslims find it difficult to accept some parts of the school curriculum not because the subjects are prohibited per se, but because their methodology of teaching is against the Guidance of Allah. The latter must be the ultimate yardstick for Muslims.

(Sarwar, 1993, p.2)

Great value is placed on the acquisition and pursuit of knowledge and education in Islam. But Parker-Jenkins raises the question ‘which knowledge should be transmitted and in what manner?’ (1995, p.38). She carried out a 12-month empirical study reviewing the needs of Muslim children in Britain examining the work being done by schools to respond to those needs. The research was carried out in private Muslim schools as well as state or common schools with Muslim intake.

The results of Parker-Jenkins’ study firstly revealed differences between the two school types in the conceptualisation of religion in the lives of Muslim children. Head teachers of Muslim private schools all expressed the need for children to have a spiritual dimension permeating their lives in and out of school. On the other hand, head teachers of state schools saw the religious dimension in school as something they had to cater for rather than seeking to foster the spiritual dimension of the pupils (Parker-Jenkins 1995).

2.7.2 Curricular Issues for Muslims

Selim (2014) raises the issue of Physical Education (P.E.) for some Muslims, considering their perspectives on gender, clothing, modesty and fasting. He explains that Muslims boys and girls do not mix with one another in games. ‘Members of the opposite sex cannot be on one team, nor can two teams of the opposite sex play against each other’ (p. 113). Furthermore, changing clothes in a communal environment for P.E. compromises Islamic values. He also highlights the difficulty Muslim students may have with P.E. during Ramadan, the Islamic period of fasting due to the physical effort required. Some scholars refute these issues with P.E. and believe that ‘religiously responsive’ accommodation in P.E. is possible (Elnour & Bashir-Ali, 2003).

Hamzeh and Oliver (2012) suggest that Muslim students could be included in P.E. if educators are more aware of the values and stipulations on Muslims regarding sport. Muslims could be accommodated by providing separate spaces for female activities with screens ‘...keeping Muslim girls away from the male staff and client gaze.’ (p. 331). However, this can be difficult or even impossible for schools to manage and according to Keaton (2006) these religiously responsive accommodations can end up excluding Muslim girls from participating in swimming, dancing and athletics.

The predominance of Christian material in the approach to religious education in Britain has been criticised by some Muslim theorists; arguing that Christianity is communicated as being more important and relevant than Islam (Salwar 1994). This is referred to by MacDonald (2012) as ‘Christo-normativity’ and is a common criticism of the practices around religion and schooling in the UK. ‘School life lends legitimacy to Christian practices and normalizes them as part and parcel of schooling in ways which potentially marginalise pupils of other faiths and those with atheist, agnostic or humanist world views’ (p. 134). MacDonald goes on to argue that this is an issue of social justice and urges educators in common schools to reflect on how the Christian calendar punctuates school terms and holidays.

Parker-Jenkins and Masterson’s (2013) study on cultural diversity in Irish schools also found results suggesting ‘the perpetuation of a predominantly ethnocentric, Eurocentric curriculum with limited input of multiculturalism’ (p. 5) in Irish curricula. Devine’s (2011) research on the Irish context acknowledges that whilst examples of good practice regarding intercultural learning can be identified in Irish schools, there is a rich opportunity for intercultural learning if Irish and ‘newcomer students’ can engage with issues of identity and culture in the curriculum with one another and with their teachers.

In Parker-Jenkins’ (1995) study in the UK, the desire of Muslims for the development of a balanced curriculum to incorporate positive Islamic role models and images, and to move away from its ethnocentric bias, is highlighted. Both state and Muslim schools in the study concur that the Islamic contribution to knowledge should be brought more to the fore. Parker Jenkins’ study (1995) also queried the appropriateness of teachers with a Christian background teaching about Islam.

Allowing a person of one denomination (or none) to teach what people of other denominations believe opens the door to the teacher's own subjectivity. In so controversial a field it is difficult to believe that the teaching of religion is not going to be coloured by the teacher's own beliefs (Zaki, 1982, p. 38).

2.7.3 Challenges for Teachers

MacDonald (2012) urges teachers to reflect on their classroom practice and maybe even Christo-centric bias in a multi-faith environment. Revell (2012) questions whether it is actually ever possible to accurately and fairly represent 'the other' in classroom contexts. Bryan (2010) found in her study of Irish schools that teachers expressed levels of uncertainty and discomfort in the face of diversity in their classrooms. Ipgrave's research (1999) on the experience of teaching religious education in a multi-faith school context in the U.K. also recognised this tension between the values and educational and religious interests of teachers and pupils.

RE teachers in religiously mixed schools are engaged in a balancing act: on the one hand educating pupils in openness towards diversity as a preparation for a harmonious society, on the other trying to satisfy faith communities which see such openness as fraught with dangers (p. 148).

Ipgrave (1999) recommends that the challenges resulting from the multi-belief context of religious education in the UK can be addressed by broadening the approach to the delivery of religious education to reflect the religious understandings of the students. She argues that religious values are not about openness to others, these are educational values. RE teachers seek to reinforce the religious values of the different faith groups in front of them as well as the educational values of respect, empathy and tolerance to help prepare students to live in a harmonious society.

Ipgrave sought the views of Muslim young people regarding this debate (1999). She suggests that effective religious education is bigger than the debate about the educational values of the educator encountering the religious values of pupils, it '...depends on the relationship between teacher, pupil and content' (p. 148).

A key observation of her study was that when she interviewed 55 Muslim pupils from both primary and secondary schools (9-13 years) she observed that their beliefs and

experience of their faith at that stage of their lives did not necessarily correspond with how their religion is portrayed in textbooks (1999, p. 149). Educational materials are often created to introduce Islam to pupils of Christian or secular backgrounds. Teachers teaching Islam experienced difficulties when Muslim students would sometimes contradict what they would teach. Ipgrave observed that the most effective way to handle this situation was to encourage the students to express themselves and explain their points of view (p. 150). Teachers who became defensive or tried to ‘...maintain a traditional role as the source of authority’ (p. 150) experienced greater difficulty managing the class and the tensions that arose:

RE lessons can become a forum for fruitful cross-cultural communication when teachers are aware of their own preconceptions and those of their resources, recognise the variety of beliefs and practices within any faith community, and think in terms not of ‘misunderstanding’ but of ‘different understandings’ (p. 152).

Liedgren (2016) found in her research with Jehovah’s Witnesses that students of this faith had positive experiences regarding their religious identity when teachers were ‘...clear, respectful and open with their opinions’ (p. 5). Teachers, therefore, need to be prepared to adapt their style and approach to teaching when teaching religious education in a multi-belief context.

2.7.4 Curricular Issues for Jehovah’s Witnesses

For Jehovah’s Witnesses, content on democracy and the theory of evolution and practices connected to religious festivals can be problematic (Liedgren 2016). From a young age, the standards Jehovah’s Witnesses believe are taught in the Bible are instilled in children in their families and congregations and they are told that they will be exposed to ‘erroneous teaching’ about the theory of evolution, for example, in school (Liedgren 2016). Many Jehovah’s Witnesses parents choose to remove their children from religious practices or religious education in schools, which is their constitutional right in Ireland. This may be viewed by educators as an experience of exclusion for the child but Liedgren (2016) found in her research that it can also be an experience of feeling strengthened; ‘behaving in alignment with their faith’ (p. 3). Jehovah’s Witnesses often identify experiences of exclusion or prejudice as a confirmation of being on ‘the right path’ and ‘a confirmation of faith, as

indicated in Bible passages’ (p. 6). The issue of opting out of religious education will be explored further in the next section.

In conclusion, Lawton (1975) defines ‘curriculum’ as the transmission of culture. Parker-Jenkins and Masterson (2013) ask the pertinent questions ‘...whose culture is being transmitted and where is there scope for having a balanced offering, which includes the history and religion of others, and which celebrates the achievement of diverse cultures?’ (p.11).

2.7.5 Opting Out of Religious Education

According to the UN Convention of Human Rights, parents have the right to raise their children according to their own choice of religion (1948, art. 26:3). Similarly, the right of schools to provide religious instruction in the Irish Constitution is carefully balanced by the right of parents to withdraw their child from religious instruction (Art. 44.2.4) or any subject that is contrary to the conscience of the parent of the student under the age of eighteen (Education Act, 30(2)(e),1998).

In 2010 a study on the views of students of minority belief background regarding their right to opt out of religious education was carried out through Queens University, Belfast (Mawhinney, Niens, Richardson and Chiba). While this research project was carried out in Northern Ireland many of the emerging recommendations are relevant to wider national and international situations. Some of the key findings in this report state that the existence of the right to opt out of religious education does not necessarily lead to minority students feeling that their religion or beliefs are acknowledged or respected in the school. This finding is supported by Smyth and Darmody (2011) who conclude from their research that the ways in which schools address religious diversity is an important issue for ethnic minority parents and students. They also state that some ethnic minority students admitted to ‘...taking part in religious education class in order not to be singled out as different’ (2011, p.137).

The Queen’s Report acknowledges that while many students of minority beliefs feel supported by their peers and, at times, by their teachers, the lack of attention given to their beliefs in the religious education curriculum causes them to feel that these beliefs are not valued or respected by the school, nor indeed more widely by the education system

(Mawhinney et al. 2010). Even when transparent policies and procedures are in place in schools regarding students' withdrawal for RE, the lack of consultation with students of minority beliefs led to a sense among many of them that their beliefs were not of interest or concern to their school.

In order for pupils to feel respected and protected in their right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, young people expected schools to move beyond merely offering a poorly executed opt-out clause (2010, p.5).

Nixon's (2016) research makes the important distinction between confessional and non-confessional religious education. His research in Scottish schools finds that an overwhelming majority of schools think the right to withdraw should be abolished in state schools. He goes on to argue that '...in the current global climate, the need to understand the ubiquity of ritual, belief and ideology; their impact and the universal needs they manifest, is pressing' (p. 12). Jenson (2005), also contests the opt-out clause for schools stating that religious education should be compulsory to expose children to a range of alternative views and promote tolerance and understanding in society. He also argues that it is not the role of the state to encourage the 'quarantining of children' from the reality of pluralism by providing a conscience clause.

Although Community National schools offer a multi-belief programme for all beliefs to reduce the possibility of children from minority belief backgrounds opting-out of religious education, their efforts may not satisfy all parents in the school community.

2.7.6 Religious Celebrations and Symbols

A key principle of Community National schools is to respect, celebrate and recognise diversity in its various forms. The celebration of significant belief and cultural events is rooted in its ethos and recognised as a practical way of demonstrating the inclusive ethos of the schools (CNS 2017). Celebration is also understood in CNS literature as going 'beyond tolerance or acceptance of children from different belief or cultural traditions' (2017, p. 3). However, CNS guidelines are clear to emphasise that the approach taken to these celebrations should avoid overt religious expressions:

The celebration of a particular belief in school should not have an overt religious dimension but should be an inclusive event of a celebratory nature. Schools should avoid hosting overtly religious events for single beliefs e.g. prayer services or rituals for one particular religious group. If requested by parents, these can be facilitated by the school outside of school time (CNS 2017, p. 3).

The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism Report clearly recommends that in a publically-managed school, it is necessary that all beliefs are respected and no communal celebrations are in conflict with the constitutional, legal or human rights of the students (Coolahan et al. 2012, p. 94). However, some authors argue that well-intended efforts at including and celebrating minority groups in schools can be often considered superficial (Troyna 1987; Coelho 1998; Bryan 2008). In the UK the term ‘saris, samosas and steel bands’ (Troyna 1987) has been used to criticise a perceived trivial approach to multiculturalism. Coelho (1998) describes features of this approach as the staging of school concerts, wearing traditional clothing of various cultures and sampling ethnic food for these significant events. She argues that they have little impact on curriculum and learning and can trivialise different cultures by emphasising them as exotic and different. She also contends that these events generally focus on the cultures that are considered ‘different’ to the majority culture. A consequence of this can be that the mainstream culture is not recognised as a diverse culture and therefore not celebrated or recognised in the same way. Bryan (2008) also argues that Irish schools, in their efforts to be inclusive and welcoming ‘simultaneously abnormalise diversity in the sense that it represents it as a new and aberrant phenomenon and therefore as something which is at once unusual and alien to the Irish nation’ (p. 54). Similarly, Hegarty and Titley (2013) issued guidelines for Irish schools and colleges of education regarding intercultural events in schools, cautioning against tokenism and stereotyping. They state that tokenism arises when one person is asked to speak or represent an entire belief group or culture. This fails to recognise the plurality that exists within beliefs and can reinforce people’s generalisation about particular groups.

The celebration of Halloween has been a controversial issue in schools in the UK (Homan 1991; Plater 2007, 2013) and eliminated from most English primary schools. Plater (2007) describes it as ‘an uncomfortable annual festival’ (p. 169) in Britain because most of the practices associated with the festival challenge contemporary religious and secular

values; door-to-door soliciting, free-movement of children in the streets at night; a focus on death, spirits and demons and traditional divination games and rituals. In his research, Plater (2007) found that only 5% of teachers included any reference to Halloween in their classwork.

In the U.S. the ‘December Dilemma’ (Tanenbaum 2015) refers to a time of year when many religious festivals collide – Christmas, Hanukkah, Bodhi Day, Winter Solstice and Kwanzaa. They argue that misunderstandings and intolerance can arise if these different celebrations are not acknowledged and respected in schools. They emphasise the importance of avoiding any implication that some festivals are more important than others. They recommend that this can be achieved by focusing on common ground and shared values and similarities between the various traditions.

Another contested area for public schools internationally has been use of religious symbols and iconography throughout schools. A legal case in Italy ‘Regarding the Presence of Crucifixes in State Schools’ (European Court of Human Rights 2005) brought this issue to the fore in public schools in Italy. The Court ruled in favour of the state’s decision to hang crucifixes in state school, supporting the place the schools accord to religion and the country’s majority religion. However, they added the clause that this is ‘provided that those decisions do not lead to a form of indoctrination’ (2005, Par. 69). Similarly, in 2011, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the 47 member-states of the Council of Europe (including Ireland), are not violating anyone’s rights by displaying religious symbols, like the crucifix, in public places; or the walls of state classrooms.

2.7.7 Wearing Religious Symbols or Garments

In 2008, a controversy arose in Gorey Community School around the wearing of the hijab, the Muslim headscarf for women. This ignited a debate regarding the wearing of religious symbols in schools in Ireland. The National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI) issued a discussion paper on this matter, highlighting that banning religious symbols would likely result in unnecessary tensions arising that were not prevalent before and advocated ‘reasonable accommodation’ on the issue (Hogan 2011). In response to public pressure, the Department of Education and Skills (2008) issued government recommendations on school uniform policy as follows:

1. The current system, whereby schools decide their uniform policy at a local level, is reasonable, works and should be maintained.
2. In this context, no school uniform policy should act in such a way that it, in effect, excludes students of a particular religious background from seeking enrolment or continuing their enrolment in a school. However, this statement does not recommend the wearing of clothing in the classroom which obscures a facial view and creates an artificial barrier between pupil and teacher. Such clothing hinders proper communication.
3. Schools, when drawing up uniform policy, should consult widely in the school community.

Whilst these recommendations are clearly supportive of the freedom of religious expression and the wearing of religious symbols, in contrast to policies in France and Belgium for example, the government was still criticised for not taking a clearer stance on this issue and leaving decision-making to each school. Parker-Jenkins and Masterson (2013) recommend that a policy on school uniforms in Irish schools needs to be further developed in order to meet the needs of pupils with culturally diverse backgrounds to avoid discrimination towards any religious groups in the future.

2.7.8 Religious Diet and Schools

Another area of challenge in schools due to religious diversity is that of food. Parker-Jenkins' study (1995) found that Muslim needs regarding school diet were seen as being accommodated by a variety of arrangements and were not perceived to be a major difficulty. However, a more recent study by Twiner, Cook & Gillen (2009), found there were a number of overlooked issues regarding religious identity and school dinners in the UK.

The main areas of concern seemed to be fasting. Parents who participated in the research accepted that all a school can feasibly do is provide a room away from the canteen during Ramadan and in the UK some children, who are entitled to free school meals, bring their meal home in a plastic container.

Similar to the issues with curricula, the Muslim parents in the study focused more on the celebration of Eid in the school. Due to the fact that Eid is a highlight of the Muslim

year, Muslim parents asked whether schools could provide a special dinner for the Muslim students for just one day in the year, just as Christmas is celebrated for the Christian students. Understandably, Muslim parents felt their children were being marginalised due to the fact that they had to acknowledge and celebrate another religion (Christianity) without similar recognition of their own religious festivals.

These findings suggest that improved communication between schools and faith groups need to be established regarding the issue of dietary requirements. Opening up the discussion of religious diets in the classroom could also prove educational for teachers as well as pupils.

2.7.9 Initial Teacher Education and Continuing Professional Development

Until recently, the majority of teachers in Ireland were prepared to teach religious education in primary schools in colleges with a denominational ethos (Coolahan et al. 2012). A priority is given to the preparation of teachers for a religious education certificate that is required in order to teach in denominational schools. Courses are beginning to emerge in the various ITE programmes on religiously diverse school contexts and curricula but these are usually offered as optional electives (Coolahan et al. 2012). Byrne (2013) argues that student teachers should not be expected to opt for one model ahead of qualification. The need for teacher education in religions and beliefs and the necessary skills required for managing religious diversity in schools is essential for teachers to confidently and competently enable respectful interaction between pupils of various beliefs and cultures (McLaughlin 2003; OSCE 2007; Coolahan et al. 2012; Irwin 2013; Byrne 2013; Jackson 2014). Nieto (2013) argues that teachers must be prepared with the necessary knowledge, tools and dispositions to enable them to effectively deal with these challenges. Teachers can often feel uncomfortable and exposed when teaching about a belief when some pupils in the class have a deeper understanding of it themselves (Ipgrave 2004). Specialist knowledge of the different religions and beliefs may, however, be too much to expect from initial teacher education for primary schools. Jackson (2014) posits that teachers who are sensitive to the ‘internal diversity of religions’ (p.4) are able to build their knowledge and confidence during teaching, if provided with the necessary support.

Qualified teachers also have a professional duty to continually up-skill and equip themselves with the skills and dispositions necessary to work in diverse classrooms (OSCE 2007). Jackson emphasises the crucial role of teachers in creating a safe space for the interaction of students with differing beliefs and the facilitation of inter-belief conversation (Jackson 2014). The need for the skill of reflexivity and reflective practice among teachers on their classroom practice and own identity in relation to the various beliefs they teach is essential (Nash and Baskette 2008; Everington, Avest, Bakker and Van der Want 2011). Scaife (2010) describes reflective practice as adopting a bird's-eye perspective on one's professional practice by considering our behaviour, thoughts and feelings in a given circumstance. She also highlights how reflective practice can foster an awareness of how underlying cultural or personal assumptions can influence our judgements. There is also the potential for teachers to influence students in their discussions about religions and beliefs if they are not adequately aware of their own assumptions and biases (OSCE 2007; Jackson 2014). If teachers are not reflective on their practice and personal assumptions, Devine (2005) argues that minority belief children may feel marginalised. Liedgren (2016) found in her research that 'interactions at school are sometimes coloured by teachers' preconceptions, which can result in condescending treatment of certain pupils' (p. 9). She also contends that teachers often feel ill-equipped to manage inter-belief conversations and how to respond to pupils from minority beliefs.

2.8 Conclusion

Parekh (2008) argues that a society cannot function unless its members share some fundamental beliefs and values in common. He suggests that common schools are the locus for the promotion of an intercultural literacy which empowers students to understand and coexist with difference. Pring (2007) echoes this, stating that common schools can create an enriching community that enables children to work together respectfully, regardless of their basic differences. However, as this chapter has outlined, this poses challenges for both the common school and the students and their families from varying minority beliefs.

It is clear from this literature review that Community National schools in Ireland are facing many challenges regarding their ethos and model of provision of religious education for all of their students within the school day. The developing multi-belief programme has

had to face the evolving context of plurality and religious diversity in Ireland. It has also had to balance this with its commitment to requirements agreed with representatives of the Catholic Church during the inception of the schools, in return for their support.

This literature review demonstrates support for the place of religion in schools and acknowledges the need to recognise a plurality of beliefs in school curricula. The studies reviewed indicate an awareness and agreement among young people and teachers of the importance of religion in society and school.

Questions relating to curricular issues, opting out of religious education, the tension between public and private values and the challenges for teachers are well represented in the literature reviewed. Evident gaps were, however, identified. Most particularly, there has been no sustained investigation of the Community National school model of religious education, something that this research seeks to remedy, at least in part. There is also a dearth of literature pertaining to clear recommendations for the celebration of religious and cultural festivals for different belief groups and for the appropriate use of religious and secular symbols in common schools. This research will also seek to address this matter.

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Introduction

The aim of this research is to explore the challenges facing Community National schools as a result of religious diversity. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research design adopted to undertake this study. It will begin by examining the different research paradigms that could have been chosen and will focus on the choice of the interpretivist paradigm within which this study is situated. A justification for choosing a qualitative approach to the study will be presented. The reasons for choosing a case study as the methodology will be clarified. The ethical implications and procedures adopted for data analysis will also be explained.

3.2 Ontological and Epistemological Assumptions

A researcher's methodological approach is underpinned by their ontological and epistemological assumptions. The researcher's philosophical stance impacts on their perspective and research approach in addition to providing the means through which data is gathered and analysed (Creswell 2007). In order to determine an appropriate research design for this project, a clear understanding of the main research philosophies that exist and their influence on research was required.

Ontology deals with the nature of reality. Blaikie states that ontological claims are 'claims and assumptions that are made about the nature of social reality' (2000, p. 8). It is from one's ontological understanding of reality that one's epistemological and methodological approaches logically flow. Different research traditions in different cultural contexts can have divergent understandings of the world and therefore different assumptions underpinning their research approach emerge. Grix (2002) suggests that there are two broad perspectives on ontological positions which he terms 'objectivism' and 'constructivism'. Whereas the former claims that there is an objective reality, independent of social actors, the latter argues that reality is continually socially constructed. It is important to draw a distinction between strict and contextual constructivism (Burningham and Cooper 1999). Strict constructivism asserts that there are multiple realities, all of equal value. Contextual constructivism, while acknowledging the possibility of objective truth, argues that

‘knowledge of this truth is only accessible through the construction of human experience, thought and language’ (Cullen 2015, p. 13).

Epistemological assumptions concern knowledge and how we learn about a phenomenon (Crotty 1998). Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) argue that there are four schools of thought in relation to research: positivism, interpretivist, critical theory and pragmatism. Positivism is a way of thinking which emphasises reason and logic. It is a research paradigm concerned with gathering information about facts in an objective and detached manner which fits well with an objectivist ontology. It originates from the ancient Greeks and has been very influential in offering ‘assurance of unambiguous and accurate knowledge of the world’ (Crotty 1998, p. 18). It operates from the assumption that knowledge is only of value if it can be measured and tested; theories and hypotheses are tested in a cause-and-effect order (Freebody 2004). It is considered to be ‘value-free’ (Robson 2002) and largely relies on quantitative methods of data collection, for example, surveys, statistics and other measurable techniques. Robson argues that while this approach is suitable when dealing with the natural world and the relationship between variables, when people are the focus of the study, particularly if it is taking place in ‘a social real world context’ (2002, p. 21) this approach does not necessarily provide the best way forward.

A second epistemological standpoint is an interpretivist approach. Following on from a constructivist ontology, where the world around us is considered to be socially constructed rather than an external or objective reality, the interpretivist approach acknowledges that the researcher is part of what is being researched not independent of it. The interpretivist researcher ‘admits the value-laden nature of the study and actively reports his or her values and biases, as well as the value-laden nature of the information gathered from the field’ (Creswell 1994, p. 6). The focus is on describing and understanding rather than measuring social phenomena. Patterns and theories emerge from the informants rather than being pre-determined by the researcher (Creswell 1994). Data collection techniques for this approach are usually qualitative, for example, interviews, case studies, observation or personal experience (Denzin and Lincoln 2000).

The critical theory paradigm seeks not only to understand situations and phenomena but also to change them and has a clear focus on social justice and politics (Creswell 2007).

It favours research that will inform change and the possibility of improving the lives of research participants, or the communities or institutions in which people live and work (Bloomberg and Volpe 2008).

Finally, the pragmatism paradigm is concerned with discovering workable, often creative solutions to research problems. There are a variety of forms of pragmatism and researchers holding this worldview are generally not committed to any one research method. Pragmatists generally adopt mixed method approaches to a study to fully understand a research problem (Bloomberg and Volpe 2008).

3.2.1 The Interpretivist Paradigm

Upon consideration of these underlying philosophical perspectives, an interpretivist paradigm was deemed the most congruent approach for this study. The aim of interpretivist research based, for this writer, on a contextual constructivist understanding, is to engage with the world of the research participants by relying on the interpretations of the participants (Creswell 2014). This seemed most appropriate for this study as it is investigating the experiences and challenges of members of a group of school communities located within an educational sector. The multiple and varied meanings that emerge from such research acknowledge the rich and complex spectrum of views expressed.

3.3 Quantitative and Qualitative Research

Depending on the nature of the research being undertaken and the questions being asked, the researcher chooses either a qualitative or quantitative approach to their study. Qualitative research seeks to understand or gain insight into a social phenomenon through relying on the views of participants through instruments such as interviews or focus groups. It suits the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm well. In quantitative research, the researcher identifies a problem based on trends and seeks measurable data using instruments that are considered impartial to ensure that the researcher's personal biases and values do not influence the results (Creswell 2012). This approach fits well with the positivist paradigm. Creswell (2012) suggests that rather than viewing qualitative and quantitative research as 'two end points in a dichotomy' (p.19), it is more helpful to view them as 'different points on a continuum' (p.19).

A qualitative research approach has been chosen for this study and considered appropriate due to its potential to provide a holistic approach to the research question. This approach suits the purpose of this study as it is seeking to gain an insight and in-depth understanding into the experiences of school principals and co-ordinating teachers regarding the challenges they experience on a day-to-day level regarding religious diversity in their schools, as well as the views of parents from different belief communities. In making this decision, criticism of qualitative methods was taken into account. Qualitative research can be assigned low credibility in relation to reliability and validity and viewed by some as only a support to the more reliable quantitative methods (Silverman 2010). It is also critiqued as being too subjective and susceptible to generalisation and a lack of transparency (Bryman 2004). Creswell (2014), however, argues in favour of qualitative research, emphasising the importance and value of the practice of reflexivity by the researcher. Their role in the study, their background, culture, and experiences are all acknowledged in how they shape the direction of the study. Furthermore, qualitative researchers can seek to counter generalisation and lack of transparency by developing ‘a complex picture of the problem or issue under study...reporting multiple perspectives, identifying the many factors involved in a situation, and generally sketching the larger picture that emerges (Creswell 2014, p. 186).

3.4 Researching Religious Diversity in Particular

Bertram-Troost (2011) argues that it is not possible to give a single definition of the term ‘religious diversity’. This indicates that researchers need to be cautious about drawing strong conclusions in this regard. Furthermore, the word ‘religion’ itself has many different meanings for different age-groups and in different countries. Miller and McKenna (2011) showed in their small scale case study of one religiously diverse school in England, that there can be many shared views and attitudes between pupils and teachers towards religion.

Bertram-Troost offers practical suggestions for overcoming these difficulties in empirical research on religious diversity. She recommends a pilot test before the final data collection in order to clarify the approach taken. She maintains that large quantitative studies are not sufficient to deal with the nuanced, complex area of religious diversity. Such large quantitative studies he argues, when conducted, are useful for giving a general context but run the risk of being too general for the complexity of the area. She also recommends a

qualitative study in order to ‘get a closer view of what is really happening in classrooms, on how religious diversity is dealt with in schools and on how this influences young people’ (2011, p. 208). Petty and Green (2007) similarly recommend that qualitative methods be employed to better understand patterns of response that emerge from quantitative data in educational settings.

These recommendations for the topic under consideration confirmed the choice that this study should employ a qualitative approach to data collection as its key source of information from school principals and co-ordinating teachers with regard to the impact of religious diversity in the schools involved. This approach was supported by a small-scale questionnaire for parents. A small-scale quantitative pilot study was also conducted in the schools in 2014 with principals and coordinating teachers of some Community National schools prior to the final data collection in 2016. This pilot study influenced the scope and direction of the research project reported on here.

3.5 Research Methodology: Case Study

A researcher’s methodological approach, underpinned by and reflecting specific ontological and epistemological assumptions, represents a choice of approach and research methods adopted in a given study.

(Grix 2002, p. 179)

Creswell (2007) identifies five main traditions in qualitative research methodology: case study, ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory and narrative research. A case study was considered the most appropriate approach to this study. A case study is a traditional method of research design used in a variety of research fields. Yin (1994) argues for the appropriateness of case studies to be used in social research and defines a case study as a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context. Multiple sources of evidence can be used. Bromley (1986) states that case study methods are appropriate when the research seeks to illuminate a particular situation, to get a close, in-depth and first-hand understanding of it. A case study helps in making direct observations and in the collection of data in natural settings, compared to relying on ‘derived’ data (p. 23).

A case study generally selects a small geographical area or limited number of individuals as the subjects of the study. It allows for a description and analysis of an intrinsically bounded system (Merriam 2009; Stake 2005). A case study is the chosen methodology for this study because it is a bounded study of the Community National school sector; a small emerging model of schools in Ireland, albeit a growing sector. It seeks to offer insight into the practical, lived experience of educators and parents associated with Community National schools.

Freebody (2003) describes three types of case studies: exploratory, explanatory and descriptive case studies. Merriam describes case studies as ‘particularistic, descriptive and heuristic’ (2009, p. 41). This study uses a descriptive case study framework which provides ‘rich, thick descriptions’ (Merriam 2009, p. 43) of the case under review. It involves as many variables as possible (Merriam 2009). In this research data collection is through field-interviews with principals and teachers and through questionnaires with parents, as will be explained further in this chapter. Henn, Weinstein and Foard (2009) state that case studies are usually associated with qualitative approaches but may also often use quantitative methods and draw from relatively structured data to enable ‘the development of a complete account of the social process under investigation’ (p. 65). This supports the approach of this research study in using both semi-structured interviews as well as questionnaires within a qualitative orientation. Freebody explains that ‘the goal of a case study, in its most general form, is to put in place an inquiry in which both researchers and educators can reflect upon particular instances of educational practice’ (2003, p. 81).

All research designs have strengths and limitations. While bringing many benefits as a style of research, case studies can also be inhibiting to the research enquiry. Criticisms of case studies have focused on the lack of rigour of this style of research (Hamel 1993). The case study investigator can allow equivocal evidence or biased views to influence the direction of the findings and conclusions. However, all researchers bring values to a study and the axiological assumptions in this study will be made clear. A second common concern about case studies is that they provide very little basis for scientific generalisation and produce theories that are narrow and idiosyncratic (Yin 1994). However, an advantage of the case study approach for this research is that it is contextual. This allows for rich, thick descriptions which capture the significance and the relevance of the challenges currently

facing Community National schools regarding religious diversity. What is true of one school may not be true of another. This research does not aim to give definitive reasoning for specific human behaviour, but rather it seeks to explore the commonalities and possibilities that could be reflected in similar situations: ‘Anchored in real-life situations, the case study results in a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon’ (Merriam 2009, p. 51).

3.6 Role of Researcher

As stated earlier, an interpretive approach usually uses qualitative approaches. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the biases, values and judgement of the researcher (Creswell 1994). The role of the researcher in this study is that of an outsider but with elements of an insider perspective also. McDermid, Peters, Jackson and Daly (2014) suggest that researchers are never fully insiders or outsiders and should be placed on a continuum. This understanding was helpful in the context of this research as while I do not work within the Community National school sector, I was involved for a year in the programme design of the multi-belief programme ‘*Goodness Me! Goodness You!*’ with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2013-2014). Therefore, I was familiar with the schools and had a working relationship with some of the principals and teachers for a year. This created opportunities as well as challenges when conducting the research. Corbin, Dwyer and Buckle (2009) state that it can provide a level of trust and openness among the participants and this in turn can lead to ‘a greater depth to the data gathered’ (p. 58). On the other hand, they argue that insider research also has the potential of impeding the research process as my perceptions may be influenced by my personal experience. However, as stated earlier, my positioning was not entirely as an insider and I was no longer working with the schools when I conducted the research, nor had I ever worked in the schools. I was familiar with some of the challenges facing the schools due to my year working with the NCCA and was aware of the relevant issues that potentially could arise in the data. Simons (2009) refers to this as ‘foreshadowed issues’ which act as a guide to the research but does not hinder the research process. Stake (1995) argues that this can influence the research questions asked and the coding categories that emerge but this is not an issue once this is acknowledged and they are clearly reflected in the presentation of the data.

It is important to also acknowledge my positioning from within the Catholic schooling sector. I previously authored national guidelines for Catholic secondary schools in Ireland on the inclusion of different faiths (Mullally 2010) and undertook my undergraduate studies as a religious educator in a Catholic institute of education. This does not necessarily mean either that I hold a bias towards denominational education. My positioning from within the denominational schooling sector has changed over the last decade and I currently lecture in the area of religious diversity in education in initial teacher education. It is important, however, to acknowledge the past experiences of the researcher. In relation to school provision in Ireland, I believe there is urgent need for greater school choice for parents, whilst simultaneously valuing the importance of denominational education.

3.7 Research Participants

This section will address the selection of the participants for interview. In qualitative research the sample is selected purposefully to yield the most information about the phenomenon of interest and it is necessary to explain the rationale for selection criteria and also to give a description of the final study participants (Merriam 2002). At the time of data collection (2016), there were eleven Community National schools in Ireland. Seven of these schools were selected for this research on the basis that they were at least three years in operation. Rather than use random sampling, it was decided that in order to be able to reflect on and interrogate the challenges of religious diversity in the schools a level of depth of experience in this area was necessary.

The decision was made to interview principals and teachers who are co-ordinators of the GMGY multi-belief programme in their schools. To get a broader perspective on the challenges, parents were also surveyed and this was facilitated through each of the schools. In some of the schools the principals were teaching principals and in two cases the principal was also the GMGY co-ordinator. As a result, the total number of participants invited to part-take in the interviews for this research project was twelve. All agreed to engage in the process. Table 3.1 gives a breakdown of the interview participants in terms of gender and role in the Community National school sector:

Table 3.1: Participants in the Study

Participant	Gender	Role
1	F	Principal
2	F	Teacher
3	M	Principal
4	F	Teacher
5	F	Principal
6	F	Teacher
7	F	Principal
8	F	Principal
9	F	Teacher
10	M	Principal
11	M	Principal
12	F	Teacher

The views of principals and teachers on their own however, do not encapsulate the entirety of the experience of the people associated with this educational sector. In order to seek a more holistic, balanced view of the challenges being faced due to different religious beliefs or worldviews, the voice of parents was also deemed necessary. Many of the issues regarding religious or secular beliefs that arise in schools often originate from parental concerns. Furthermore, the success of the multi-belief programme GMGY depends on the active role of parents. Therefore, their voice was deemed essential.

For this study the voice of parents rather than the voice of children was considered helpful as, generally, parents are the ones who make the choices for their children's initial belief orientation. They are also primarily responsible for the development of their child's belief identity and value system and the research is concerned with the challenges, if any, that they experience through their child's education in Community National schools due to their beliefs. As this study was just focusing on junior infants to second class (ages 5-8), it was decided that children are only coming to understand their belief identity and may not have the language or experience in this regard to fully express themselves. I was also aware

of research being conducted at the same time from Trinity College (Faas et al. 2017b) on children as agents in religious education in Community National schools which focused on children aged 11-12 years.

3.8 Data Collection Methods

There are several methods associated with qualitative research, as mentioned previously, for example, interviewing, focus groups and observation. Due to the complexity of the issues being discussed, one-to-one, semi-structured interviews were deemed preferable to focus groups so as to give ample opportunity to participants to explain and clarify their experiences (Lewis and McNaughton 2014).

3.8.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews are a useful research instrument ‘when investigators are interested in understanding the perceptions of participants or learning how participants come to attach certain meaning to phenomena or events’ (Berg and Lune 2012, p. 115). Similarly, Schostak (2006) describes interviews as an extended conversation between partners which aims to uncover in-depth information about a certain topic through which a phenomenon could be interpreted in terms of the meanings interviewees bring to it.

The method of semi-structured interviews allows for flexibility in the way the interview is conducted and the adaptation of the pre-determined questions to suit the interviewees. This was important in this research as some of the participants were principals and some were teachers. Robson (2002) describes semi-structured interviewing as using:

...predetermined questions, but the order can be modified based up the interviewer’s perception of what seems most appropriate. Question wording can be changed and explanations given; particular questions which seem inappropriate with a particular interviewee can be omitted, or additional ones included (p. 270).

Denscombe (2014) contends that the time and effort involved in conducting interviews are most worthwhile when the researcher wishes to explore complex and subtle phenomena such as gaining opinions, emotions, feelings and the experiences of participants. Similarly, Berg and Lune (2012) state that semi-structured interviews give scope for further probing beyond the initial questions. This style of interviewing allows participants to develop their ideas

around the topics discussed throughout the interview (Denscombe 2014) and allows for a deeper understanding of the participant's reality to be harvested.

Semi-structured interviews were therefore deemed the most appropriate form of data collection for this study. They require participants to reflect on and question their practices as well as critically evaluate their experiences. It is also, according to Merriam, 'the best technique to use when conducting intensive case studies' (2009, p. 88). The advantages of using interviews as a method of data collection is that it allows the interviewer to modify the line of enquiry if an interesting response emerges in a way that questionnaires cannot. According to Bell, an advantage of the interview is its adaptability:

A skilful interviewer can follow up ideas, probe responses and investigate motives and feelings, which the questionnaire can never do. The way in which a response is made (tone of voice, facial expression, hesitation etc.) can provide information that a written response would conceal (1999, p. 135).

3.8.2 The Parental Questionnaire

In an attempt to reach as many parents of children in Community National schools as possible, questionnaires were distributed to parents as the most suitable means of data collection. The use of an electronic questionnaire was considered the most appropriate way to engage parents for this study. Questionnaires are a traditional method of research design used in a variety of research fields. They are an efficient method for systematically collecting data from a broad spectrum of individuals and educational settings (Leedy 1997). Questionnaires provide anonymity and can help the researcher 'learn about individual attitudes, opinions, beliefs and practices' (Creswell 2012, p. 384). Questionnaires also provide a numeric description of trends, opinions or attitudes of a population (Creswell 2014). O'Leary describes questionnaires as a process that 'asks a range of individuals the same questions, related to their characteristics, attributes, how they live, or their opinions' (2014, p. 202).

This approach seemed most appropriate for this study as access to the views of parents can be challenging due to the constraints of time and family commitments. The parents associated with seven different school communities is also a large population size. Previous research conducted with parents in Community National schools using focus groups

also reported challenges due to cultural and language limitations (Lowe 2011). Therefore, an electronic questionnaire was deemed the most effective way to access the views of parents for this research.

According to Denscombe (2014) electronic questionnaires have a number of advantages when used in small-scale social research. They encourage completion due to web-based access, design and layout. The questionnaire can use a number of features from the software to reduce the possibility of errors during the process of completing the questionnaire and the software helps with the data processing. This ‘removes an element of the survey process where human error can occur’ (p. 179). Disadvantages associated with the use of electronic questionnaires include the lack of in-depth data that can be collected and the inability to probe answers for clarification or further consideration (O’Leary 2014). Creswell (2012) also cautions that web-based surveys may be biased towards a certain digitally literate demographic.

Questionnaires use a method of research that can employ both open and closed questions. Closed questions generally seek precise answers by offering the respondent a small set of responses to choose from. Open-ended questions do not impose these restrictions and seek deeper explanations and responses. The latter, however, can be difficult to collate (O’Leary 2014). In the context of this research, a number of closed questions were used to elicit data about the beliefs and motivations of parents when sending their children to Community National schools. A five-point Likert Scale sought to gauge parental attitudes to the guiding principles of Community National schools. Open questions were also used to gather the views and experiences of parents regarding any challenges that may arise for them due to their religious faith or belief.

Burgess (2001) cautions against long, unwieldy questionnaires and maintains that the key to a good questionnaire is the clarity of its aims and how the questions reflect the aims. The questions asked must be the right ones. ‘Respondents are more likely to commit to answer a questionnaire when they see it as interesting, of value, short, clearly thought through, and well presented’ (Burgess 2001, p. 5).

3.9 Ethical Considerations

An essential element of educational research is the ethical obligations of the researcher. ‘If the goal of conducting research is to produce new knowledge, knowledge that others will come to trust and rely on, then the production of this knowledge needs to be credible’ (O’Leary 2014). The formulation and adherence to a set of ethical guidelines enables the researcher to continually reflect on their approach and the credibility of their research. I adhered to the British Educational Research Association (BERA) *Guidelines for Educational Research* (2011). These guidelines emphasise the importance of respect for participants in the research regardless of ‘age, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, nationality, cultural identity, partnership status, faith, disability, political belief or any other significant difference’ (BERA 2011, p. 5). This respect has implications for how researchers conduct the research and ensure that participants provide voluntary informed consent and are aware of their right to withdraw from the study. Respondents were informed of the purpose of the study and how their responses would be used. Creswell (2014) emphasises that researchers must protect their research participants; develop their trust, promote the integrity of the research and guard against misconduct and impropriety that may reflect on their organisation or schools.

The ethical issues of interviewing considered for this study were anonymity and the right to privacy. Interviewees were informed of the purpose of the study and how their responses would be used. Gorden (1975) cautions against leaking information that could make the interviewee vulnerable in their place of work. Therefore, interviewees were assured that the recording and transcripts of the interviews were solely for the purposes of this study and a copy of each transcript was sent to each participant for verification and approval. They were also assured that they would not be named in the presentation of the data.

The ethical issues surrounding questionnaires firstly focus on the privacy of the participants and the protection of their privacy. Otherwise, this may also affect the response rate. According to Burgess (2001), it helps to explain as much as possible about the research to the respondent, both at the beginning and throughout the questionnaire.

3.10 Research Procedures

In November 2015 an application was made to the DCU Ethics Committee. The research was considered to be a low risk social research project and permission was granted to conduct the research by the committee (Appendix A). The research procedures began in January 2016. I contacted seven principals and five teachers in seven of the Community National schools. Authorisation and permission from school principals was sought before arranging the interviews (Denscombe 2014). Phone contact was initially made with the principals of each of the schools selected to explain the nature of the research and request their permission to interview them, their GMGY Coordinator and to access parents using an electronic questionnaire.

Access to the interviewees was not difficult as I had worked with the schools for a year while developing the GMGY programme and a rapport had already developed with some of the candidates chosen for interview. A follow-up email confirming the agreed interview time was sent after each phone call. Attached to the email was the plain language statement (Appendix B) to give the interviewees time to consider the nature of the interview and ensure informed consent (Appendix C) (Denscombe 2014). Signed consent was obtained from all participants on the day of the interviews.

Following permission from each of the interviewees, a MP3 recorder was used to record the interviews. A second recording device on a smart phone was also used as a back-up. Good sound quality was important and tested before each interview as the interest was not just in what the interviewees say, but also how they say it. The interviews were all conducted in the various schools selected, generally after school hours, and reflective notes were taken during and after the interview by the researcher.

The areas covered in the interview schedules were determined by the literature review and the history and development of the schools (see Appendix D and Appendix E to view the interview schedules for principals and teachers). Each of the interviews addressed the same themes but were worded differently according to the interviewee's role and context in the school. The interviews lasted approximately one hour.

The electronic questionnaires were sent out to parents in April 2016 (Appendix F). Initially I considered distributing the questionnaire at parent's evenings in each of the

schools. However, following discussion with some of the school principals, they recommended that an electronic questionnaire would be more effective. The schools were regularly using electronic means to communicate with parents and considered it a more efficient and effective way to gain access to parents and elicit responses from them. Therefore, I created the questionnaire using Survey Monkey software. The questionnaire sought to establish parents' views on the multi-belief programme GMGY and to explore any challenges they experienced in the school due to their beliefs. They were not required to answer all questions for completion of the survey.

The link to the questionnaire was emailed to each school principal along with an accompanying email explaining the rationale for the research and the plain language statement (Appendix G). Six out of the seven principals consented to send the link out to the parent body of each school. The principal who declined to send it out felt the subject of the questionnaire was too sensitive and raw as the school had experienced significant difficulty in the past with a group of parents who strongly objected to the multi-belief programme GMGY. This was disappointing as I had hoped to access the views of these parents for my research. However, a website was set up by the parents in 2014 outlining their concerns and objections and this material was used as data in my analysis of the findings.

A total of 167 parents responded to the questionnaire. Creswell argues that 'even a small return rate may not be biased and may be acceptable in research' (2012, p. 390). Nevertheless, a bias did emerge in this element of the research as there was a low response from the variety of communities of faith and belief present in the schools. The majority of the respondents indicated they were Roman Catholic.

3.11 Data Analysis

Data analysis has been defined 'as the process of bringing order to the data, organising what is there into patterns, categories and descriptive units, and looking for relationships between them' (Brewer 2000, p. 105). Unlike the analysis of quantitative data which uses well-established statistical methods, qualitative data analysis is an interpretative process and still in its early stages in research development (Walliman and Buckler 2008).

3.11.1 Overview of Data Analysis Procedure

All interview transcripts and text responses to the open-ended questions of the parental questionnaire were coded using the following categories:

- Principals: P1- P7
- Teachers: T1- T5
- Parents: PT1- PT167

In order to produce a convincing interpretation of qualitative data, the researcher requires some basic tools or a framework to assist in the analysis the data. Denscombe (2014) identifies five stages in the analysis of qualitative data to ensure credibility and verification: preparation of the data, familiarity with the data, interpreting the data, verifying the data and representing the data.

In this research process, the data was prepared by transcribing each of the audio interviews and reading them thoroughly to ensure familiarity with the data. The verbatim transcripts were returned to the interviewees to invite comment or clarification and to verify the findings of the study. Due to the small-scale nature of the data, hand-analysis was employed when reading the interview transcripts rather than computer programmes such as NVivo.

The process of interpreting the data; developing codes, categories and concepts, drew on the work of Miles and Huberman (1994). They suggest that data analysis consists of three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing / verification. Data reduction involves selecting and focusing on raw data. The analytical process of coding requires the researcher to review, select, interpret and summarise the data without distorting it (Walliman and Buckler 2008). 'Usually, several passages are identified and they are then linked with a name for that idea – the code' (Gibbs 2007, p. 38). The codes in the transcripts were underlined and labelled using colour coding and tags. Emerging themes were identified on the right hand margin of the transcripts and questionnaire response sheet (see Appendix H for an image of the coding process).

3.11.2 Analysis of Questionnaires

Survey Monkey software offers analysis tools which can perform statistical analyses and create tables and graphs as well as cross-tabulation features to compare results or trends in the respondent's answers. For these reasons, it was chosen for the parent's questionnaires. Data, such as Likert scales, can also be coded by the software for analysis and was therefore appropriate. The software summarises all answers to the questions and upon request creates filters, to compare or focus in on specific subsets of the data for analysis. For open ended responses to the questions, themes were identified by the software as well as outliers or noteworthy exceptions to trends.

3.11.3 Interpreting the Data

The next stage of the analytical process was data display. This involved assembling the data into displays such as charts or graphs which assisted in clarifying the main direction of the analysis (Walliman and Buckler 2008). Tesch's (1990) data analysis procedure recommends clustering together similar topics and grouping topics that relate to each other together using columns and rows to summarise the coded data (Appendix I). Fragments or quotations were then selected from each interview transcript and placed in a file for each code.

Conclusion drawing involved observing the emerging relationships and patterns between categories and deciding what these may mean (Miles and Huberman 1994). The similar codes that were grouped together were finally reduced to five major themes with minor themes subsumed within some of the major themes. The verification of these conclusions drawn were then tested by triangulating them with the relevant literature and data from the questionnaires with parents. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) argue that the use of triangulation, while not specifically a tool of verification, is a useful alternative and reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question. It is 'a strategy that adds rigour, breadth complexity, richness and depth to any inquiry' (Flick 2009, p. 229).

3.12 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the research design of this study, summarising the paradigm within which it is situated, the qualitative methodology it employs and the methods of analysis used. While the important issues of validity and reliability have been discussed throughout this chapter, it is worthwhile emphasising once again that the subjectivity of the qualitative researcher need not be regarded as a weakness but as an addition to the study. This chapter bears testimony to the concerted efforts to ensure transparency regarding my own particular values and positionality as a researcher through the rigor employed in the methodology used and the data analysis process. The aim in qualitative research is not to eliminate the influence of the researcher but to understand it and use it productively: ‘validity in qualitative research is not the result of indifference, but of integrity’ (Maxwell 2013, p. 124).

CHAPTER 4 REPORT OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the main findings that arose from the interviews and questionnaires collected for this research project. As outlined in Chapter Three, three stake-holder populations were included in the research – principals, co-ordinating teachers and parents. Seven principals and five teachers were interviewed and a total of 167 parents from the seven schools selected responded to the questionnaire for parents.

In keeping with case study methodology I was keen to allow the voices of the participants to be heard in the presentation of the data (Creswell 2012). Interviewees in this study were very articulate due to their investment in their roles as GMGY coordinators in the schools and their engagement with the development of the GMGY programme with the NCCA. Therefore, there are a number of extensive quotations from the interviewees presented in the findings of this research.

As the data was coded and analysed clear major themes and minor sub-themes emerged as being the most significant current challenges to Community National schools regarding religious diversity. The themes are:

- **Major Theme 1** - GMGY Multi-Belief Programme
 - Minor Sub-Theme:* Belief-Specific Teaching
 - Minor Sub-Theme:* Parents and the GMGY Guiding Principles
- **Major Theme 2** - Sacramental Preparation
- **Major Theme 3** - Festivals and Celebrations
 - Minor Sub-Theme:* The Use of Symbols
- **Major Theme 4** - Encounters Between Parental Values and School Ethos
 - Minor Sub-Theme:* Curricular Issues
- **Major Theme 5** - Training and CPD for Teachers

Each of the five themes which emerged are explored individually in the sections of this chapter.

In the parent's questionnaire respondents were asked to identify what belief they identified with and the results were as follows:

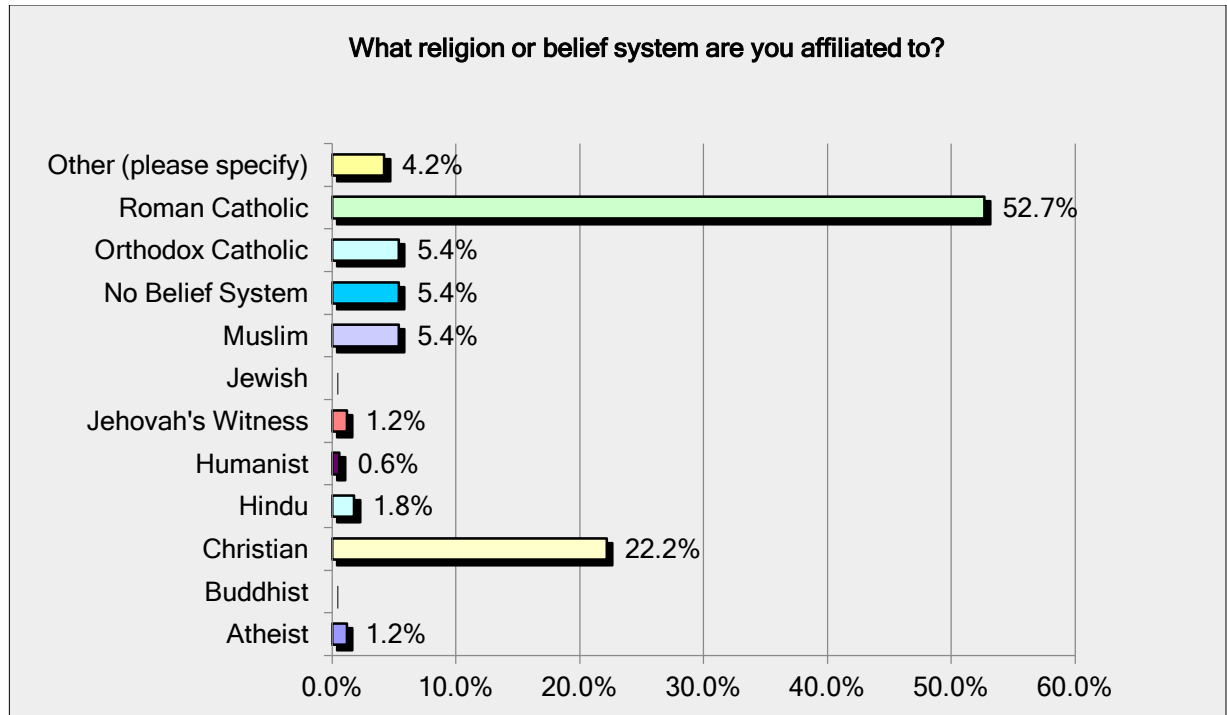


Figure 4.1 Analysis of the Beliefs of Parent Respondents to Questionnaire

Almost 53% of the respondents were Roman Catholic. 22% were under the broad category of Christian and 5.4% identified as Orthodox Catholic. 5.4% were Muslim. A total of 7% declared to have no religious belief (Atheist, Humanist or No Belief). 1.8% were Hindu and 1.2% were Jehovah's Witnesses. 4.2% ticked the 'other' category and these were listed as Sikh, Lutheran, Romanian Orthodox and Greek Orthodox as well as one respondent who said 'my husband is Muslim and I am Catholic'.

It is important to note that the vast majority (approximately 84%) of the respondents are from Christian traditions and a small percentage of the parents who responded were from Islamic, Hindu or Atheistic backgrounds.

4.2 Major Theme 1: GMGY Multi-Belief Programme

The GMGY Multi-Belief programme taught in Community National schools emerged as a major area of challenge for all of the interviewees. There were a number of sub-themes that

came under this heading and will be outlined below. Before examining the challenges posed by the programme, interviewees were also keen to acknowledge its strengths. There was agreement among all of the principals and teachers interviewed that the narrative approach used in GMGY is child-centred and this is its greatest strength. P4 stated:

They are really diverse stories, they are really well thought-out stories and I like that it is story-based... children can relate to that, it's about living their lives to the full so there is a lot of potential for that in the programme.

T4 commended the emphasis given to the agency of the child in the programme; 'they can all have their say... and their opinions and their voices are heard'. P6 also believed that the GMGY programme is a distinctive aspect of Community National schools and a reason why parents choose this school model. P5 acknowledged the depth of engagement the programme undergoes with the various committees associated with the programme's development; 'I think praise should be given for how it has been developed over the years that it's constantly being reviewed'. P3 acknowledged the difficult task of the programme aims and its efforts to provide a programme and materials that brings children of all beliefs together.

Whilst the narrative approach was considered a strength among all of the interviewees, contrary evidence emerged in the interviews regarding the challenges facing this approach. A number of the interviewees spoke about GMGY becoming similar to a literacy lesson and not achieving the lesson's learning outcomes. The potential to nurture the belief identity of the child was being lost. T1 stated:

At the moment it's like another English lesson. I don't think it's doing what it's supposed to be doing really... because it's a story and you are asking questions, it's like an oral language lesson really and unless the children themselves are really in the know about their own faith I don't think it really throws up any relevant questions.

P4 commented on the lack of autonomy given to teachers in the programme which resulted in a lack of engagement from the teachers with the preparation and delivery of the lessons:

The teachers are just following this programme word for word and not veering off it that much... but the effect of that is, well, it hasn't much effect on the children. It could be a good literacy lesson.

P4 went on to say that while the stories were pitched well and full of possibility, 'in terms of evoking, stimulating a really rich conversation around any sort of a religious or a belief perspective, for me and a lot of teachers I know it didn't really happen'. T1 elaborated further stating that many teachers in her school 'would be very afraid to talk about certain religions in case they say anything wrong'.

4.2.1 The Role of Parents

The engagement of parents with the GMGY lessons at home is central to the success of the programme (Murphy, 2013; NCCA, 2015). Most of the interviewees were doubtful that this was happening, particularly within indigenous Irish families. P7 argued that 'the parents don't know what's in the programme, they don't understand it...they have zero interaction with it in any school'. However, T4 observed that some faith communities did appear to engage with the GMGY programme at home:

I would very rarely see a child coming to GMGY with what you would see as their parents having backed up all this with a religious view. A lot of the time you would see it with Hindus or Muslims who are much more rooted in their faith.

It is interesting to note that contrary evidence to the interviewee's assumptions arose in the questionnaire for parents. One of the questions in the questionnaire was how aware they were of the GMGY programme and 49% stated that they were very aware and engage with the material at home (Figure 4.2).

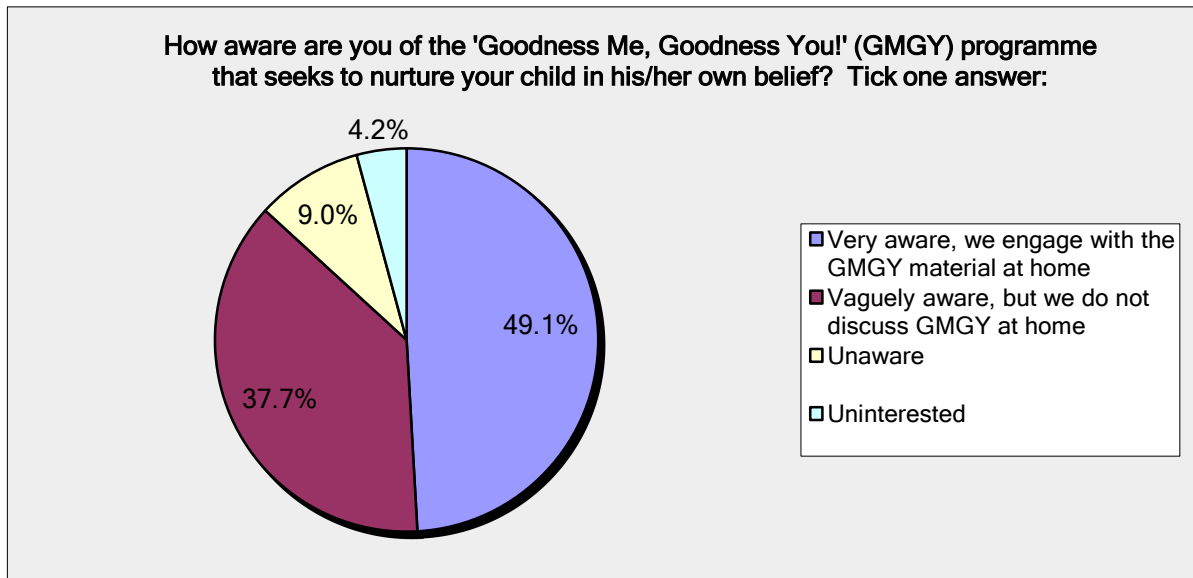


Figure 4.2 Parental Responses to Question 3

This contradicts the sense the teachers and principals have that the parents do not interact with the GMGY programme at home. However, 51% of the parents stated that they do not engage with GMGY, which is a bare majority of the respondents. A cross-tabulation of the survey data reveals that 56% of the parents who say that they engage with the GMGY programme with their children identify as Roman Catholic. 19% come under the broadly Christian category and 10% are Muslim. 7% of parents with no belief state that they engage with GMGY with their children at home.

Table 4.1. Identity of parents who engage or do not engage with GMGY Programme

Belief of Parents	Engage with GMGY at Home	Do Not Engage with GMGY
Christian	19%	26%
Hindu	1%	2.5%
Jehovah's Witnesses	2.4%	0
Muslim	10%	2%
No Belief	7%	6%
Orthodox	4%	12%
Roman Catholic	56%	50%

Although there is a small response rate from parents who are Jehovah's Witnesses, they all engage with the GMGY programme at home. In the category of parents who state that they are vaguely aware or unaware or uninterested in the GMGY programme 50% are Roman Catholic parents. 12% are from the Orthodox traditions and 26% identify as Christian. Only 2% of Muslim parents say they do not engage with the programme and 6% are parents with no belief.

4.2.2 Belief Nurturing

The aim of belief nurturing within the GMGY programme emerged as a specific issue that the teachers and principals struggled with. The programme seeks to nurture the belief of all of the various beliefs in Community National schools. T5 described this as 'impossible'. Others admitted that they don't have the time or the expertise to consider how the story might connect to the religious identities of the different children in their class. T3 reinforced this and how difficult it is for teachers:

I suppose GMGY works from a presumption of the best of a belief. So if you are a practicing Catholic that is talking to your child about what they heard at mass every week, if you are teaching the child all the prayers, if you are discussing God at home then GMGY is going to allow you to access your religion without any issues. If you're not then you run into difficulty and the teacher is put into a very compromising position.

P7 questioned whether Community National schools should even be seeking to nurture belief; 'that word [*nurture*] is bandied around all the time and nobody actually knows what it means...how are we enriching faith? And have we the right to enrich faith?'.

Two of the interviewees spoke about how one of the Community National schools encountered a significant challenge when a cohort of parents from a minority belief asked to see some of the GMGY lessons and objected to the content and approach of the programme. After much dialogue with the parents the principal suspended the teaching of GMGY in the school as over one hundred parents from this belief tradition had withdrawn their children from the GMGY programme.

P7: They wanted belief specific teaching to cease, they wanted any indoctrination in terms of religion in the programme to be taken out, they wanted a more ethical programme.

The parents also had an issue with the classroom teachers, who were predominantly Irish Catholics, nurturing their child's belief. T5 said, 'that's when you realised that things are very black and white for some people, they don't see the niceties in comparing a prophet to a character in a children's book'. T5 went on to describe the reaction of some of the parents to the GMGY programme:

'We don't teach our faith in that way'. 'We don't use those sort of methodologies to teach faith'...'We will teach our children their faith in our own way, thank you very much but you don't need to bother with that'.

4.2.3 Inter-belief Conversation

'We have these rich stories, I think it needs to go further now and an area that needs to develop is inter-faith dialogue, I don't think that that is fully there yet' (T2)

One of the guiding principles of the GMGY programme is inter-belief conversation (NCCA, 2014). Teachers are required to act as facilitators of these conversations during GMGY lessons and encourage interaction between the children with different beliefs and cultures. It emerged in the data that many of the interviewees feel they and many of the teachers in their schools lack confidence in this area and shy away from 'difficult conversations'. P5 stated:

My challenge is that I would feel that I don't fully understand all the different faith groups and I'm nervous sometimes about 'Am I being completely respectful?'

The GMGY programme emphasises that teachers do not need to be experts about the different beliefs to facilitate conversation between them in the classroom. P4 reinforced the importance of the agency of the child and the need for teachers to be good facilitators of 'respectful dialogue', ensuring 'that nobody gets offended... to allow children, and give them that autonomy over what they are saying and to listen to those voices'.

However, T3 explained one of the challenges that arise for teachers who try to facilitate inter-belief dialogue:

A lot of our children are not religiously literate enough to have that conversation so once again, you are presuming that the parent has given the belief to the child and that child is versed in their own belief, which some children are. But the majority of children are not versed in their belief.

T1 also stated, ‘when they are four, five, six, they don’t know enough about their own faith to ask important questions or to really enter into dialogue that will actually have much meaning’.

4.3 Minor Sub-Theme: Belief Specific Teaching

Belief specific teaching (BST) is a key part of the GMGY junior programme. It aims to explicitly nurture the beliefs and practices appropriate to the various belief groups. For four weeks each year children are differentiated into various belief groups, namely, Muslims, Christian, Roman Catholic and Humanist/Buddhist/Hindu (HBH). The teachers employed in the school teach the belief specific modules. It became clear during the coding and analysis process that belief specific teaching is the most challenging aspect of GMGY for teachers and principals.

Some of the respondents seemed unsure about what their stance on BST was, seeing many advantages as well as disadvantages to the approach. This confusion was evident when P2 stated, ‘a commentary would be that the kids are being segregated for religious instruction where in actual fact it’s not really what’s happening but then it was to a certain degree’. P3 also stated:

I had been quite convinced of belief-specific teaching...but I’m falling out of love with it. I had been of the opinion that it does really strengthen children’s beliefs, that it strengthens their identity within their own group and now I’m coming out of that opinion.

One principal (P1) was very much in favour of BST and did not wish to see it removed from the programme. This respondent argued that parents were ‘incredibly touched’ by the efforts made by the school to recognise and seek to nurture the religious identity of their child. P1

went on to argue that BST is an important part of the growth of the CNS model and provides a distinctive difference between Community National schools and Educate Together schools. While many of the interviewees were not in favour of BST in the GMGY programme, some of them could nonetheless recognise a value in the aim of the lessons to contribute to children's religious identity development at a young age: 'in the junior end maybe it is good to make sure that they know who they are themselves before exploring other faiths' (T1). This was echoed by P4:

I think we need to ground children in their own identities first. I could live with BST up to second class in terms of you're really getting them deep down into their vocabulary so that they are prepared for the more robust stuff from third to sixth class.

However, P4 went on to state, 'we have really broadly grouped these groups and the HBH group is something that I will never be comfortable with'. The following four sub-sections outline why eleven out of the twelve interviewees named BST as one of the most significant challenges for their schools.

4.3.1 Inequality of Provision

All of the interviewees recognised that the HBH category created a deep discomfort and was unfair to the children in that group. The principal in favour of BST argued that at least it was some attempt at accommodation rather than nothing at all for these belief groups:

P1: Obviously, it's impossible to guarantee total and utter equality to every single group, to every single faith, to every single specific belief within each of those faiths – that's just not possible...It's the best that we can do at this point.

However, others felt genuine discomfort about the inequality in the teaching and learning experience being shown to some belief groups. P7 said, 'Hindus, Buddhists and Humanists all lumped in together, I just couldn't understand how that could be right. It seems very disrespectful'. T1 also said, 'for a programme that claims to be so into equality and inclusivity, I don't think it really delivers that in belief specific teaching'.

Two interviewees also wondered if there was a favouring of Roman Catholic children over other belief groups. T3 stated, ‘certain groupings are getting more access to their religious education than other groupings are so straight away there is an issue.’ P5 also said:

How could it be true to the integrity of the programme... why are we splitting them? What needs and what requirements are we addressing and is it just because the Catholic Church said to meet the requirements of sacramental preparation this must take place?

T3 went on to describe how the ‘Catholic grouping’ get a lot out of the BST lessons because the teacher was not acting as a facilitator but was actually ‘faith-forming’. As stated earlier in Chapter Two, the GMGY programme acknowledges that teachers are not specialists in the various belief groups in schools and are not equipped to form children in their individual beliefs. Instead, the programme encourages teachers to be facilitators in the BST lessons; allowing children to take the lead and affirm them in their identities. However, many of the teachers disputed this, saying that in the Catholic grouping particularly, the children did not have a knowledge-base about their faith; they did not know the prayers or many of the parables. Therefore, the teacher had to teach them about their religion and felt they were engaging in faith-formation.

T2: There was an assumption... that children have a grounding in the Catholic faith and were very familiar with these stories and it made references to the wedding at Cana, to miracles, to parables and the children hadn’t actually come across that language.

T5 also raised the point that not all teachers are comfortable with teaching faith in schools and felt they should not be asked to do so in Community National schools.

4.3.2 Teacher Vulnerability

The expectations placed on teachers also arose as a challenge within belief specific teaching. Teachers were described as ‘vulnerable’, ‘uncomfortable’ and ‘fearful’ by many of the interviewees. P7 described, ‘the terror inside every teacher in terms of misplacing a child in the wrong faith group was huge and very unfair on the teachers’. T1 described the feelings of some of the teachers in her school, saying; ‘I’m not a Muslim’ or ‘I’m not a Christian so

I can't teach that as a truth, I don't feel I can, I feel like I'm in a compromised position'. T5 also suggested that BST was disrespectful to different belief groups:

You are teaching religion or trying to on some level teach sections of people's faith to them and you are doing it poorly which is a disservice and it's disrespectful when you have...the teachers not knowing what they are doing. I include myself in that.

4.3.3 Diversity within Diversity

The diversity within religions was also reported as a challenge. The way in which a religion is represented in the classroom could provoke a reaction from children or parents from that tradition. T2 described how she used to invite parents into her class to speak about their belief tradition. However, 'what might be true for them might not necessarily be true for all of that religion...you will get told very fast by the children if you make a statement'. T3 also described this as a challenge:

Within the denominations there have been disparities...in the Islamic group we have had different opinions on what is right and what is wrong. We've had cases where we have invited community representatives from that belief into the classroom to talk to the children and then we've had other parents in saying 'Actually, that person doesn't believe the same thing as I believe so, no, we don't want them in again please'.

4.3.4 The Logistics of Belief Specific Teaching

Finally, the logistics of separating children into different religious groupings and moving them around the school at the same time was expressed as a challenge by nine of the interviewees. P2 described it as 'a massive, massive challenge' and T5 said it was 'a logistical nightmare and a political nightmare'. P6 spoke about an occasion where they had forty children in one classroom because they didn't have enough staff to teach the different groups, yet in another room there were only three children because they were from a different belief system. P3 described the separation of children according to belief as potentially 'othering' of some groups:

If you have a very small Muslim group or a very small HBH group, that can be quite othering for a small number of children where 50% of the school are broken into Catholic groups and all of a sudden there are three or four children sitting in a Muslim group in the smallest room in the school crouched around a laptop.

4.4 Minor Sub-Theme: Parents and the GMGY Guiding Principles

Despite the significant challenges that have arisen from the GMGY programme for the teachers and principals interviewed for this research, the majority of the parents who responded to the questionnaire were positive towards the guiding principles of the programme. 83% were generally happy that their children were exposed to different beliefs in school whilst 13% expressed an uncertainty and 4% generally disagreed.

Table 4.2 Analysis of Parent's Responses to Q. 4

Q.4: I am happy that my child is exposed to different religious and non- religious belief systems in school		
	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	68	42%
Agree	66	41%
Unsure	21	13%
Disagree	3	1.8%
Strongly Disagree	4	2.4%
No Response	5	

A Muslim parent who was obviously not in favour of their child being exposed to the different beliefs in the school stated: 'Do not want my child to be confused' (PT51) and a parent of no belief stated: 'Difficult to explain to a child why we believe there is no God when you live in a society where there is a faith in the existence of a God' (PT48). 82% were generally in agreement that Community National schools should seek to nurture their child's belief. However, 14% were unsure and 5% disagreed:

Table 4.3 Analysis of Parent's Responses to Q.5

Q.5: Community National schools should seek to nurture the development of the whole child, including their beliefs or religion.		
	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	70	44%
Agree	61	38%
Unsure	23	14%
Disagree	6	4%
Strongly Disagree	2	1%
No Response	5	

The majority of parents, therefore are in favour of their children being exposed to different beliefs (83%) and that Community National schools should nurture their child's belief (82%). These percentages are remarkably close. A parent identifying as Atheist explained his or her disagreement with the principles of the GMGY programme in an open-question in the questionnaire:

PT6: There is a perception in the school that religion is part of everyday life. A message that a religion, no matter what it is, is good. However, this does not support the children who are being raised in a non-religious environment. We automatically are lacking and different. I would prefer there to be no religious instruction in schools and no division of children. Religion should be taught in the appropriate religions community of worship, not school.

A significant majority of parents (95%) generally agreed that they are the primary educators of their child in terms of values, beliefs and practices (see Table 4.4). One parent reinforced this, stating in an open-question in the questionnaire:

PT39: We practice our faith at home and with extended family. However, because Religion has become so diverse, teaching Religion in a class setting has become impossible, so the role of family and extended family and friends has had to step in and teach more than was previously necessary.

Table 4.4 Analysis of Parent's Responses to Q.8

Q.8: I am responsible for handing on the values, beliefs and traditions of my family and community to my child		
	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	87	54%
Agree	67	41%
Unsure	7	4%
Disagree	1	0.6%
Strongly Disagree	0	0
No Response	5	

4.5 Major Theme 2: Sacramental Preparation

Roman Catholic sacramental preparation in Community National schools and the lack of regulation around it arose as a challenge for the seven schools interviewed. This research project focused on the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist for Roman Catholic children in the junior end of the school. Community National schools state that they provide sacramental education to Catholic children through the GMGY programme. Sacramental education is different to sacramental preparation. Sacramental education is implicit in the GMGY programme; in the various stories and themes that can be drawn out in the lessons by teachers and parents. Explicit faith formation or belief nurturing for Reconciliation and Eucharist takes place during belief specific teaching for the Catholic children from junior infants to second class. Preparation for the sacraments is understood in CNS literature as the role of the parents and parish (NCCA, 2014). The school's role is to facilitate communication between the parents and parishes in preparing the child for the sacraments (NCCA, 2015(a)) and to foster the flourishing of the child's belief within the GMGY programme (NCCA, 2014). Of central importance to this approach is the active, participatory role of parents in the religious education of their children (NCCA, 2014).

4.5.1 Relationship with the Parish

The data collected for this research project reveals an inconsistency and tension within some of the schools and their parish communities regarding the sacraments. It is clear that some

Community Nationals schools felt they were required by their parishes to provide preparation for the sacraments during school hours. It is evident that each school has a different approach to sacramental preparation that seems to depend on the catechetical support available in their local parishes. Three of the schools considered themselves ‘lucky’ (P1/P3/P7) that they had good support from their local parish and did not have to engage in faith formation during the school day. However, four out of the seven schools offered some form of sacramental preparation during school hours, above and beyond the belief specific modules and GMGY core programme:

P5: We have links with the parish and they did place a request on us, I don’t know if you would say even a demand, as to how much time the children spent on it [sacramental preparation]...so after Christmas Catholic children and other faith children were split at GMGY time.

In these four schools, sacramental preparation took place in second class during GMGY time, removing the children from the class to attend a separate class for faith formation. The other three schools did not offer any sacramental preparation during school hours. Table 4.5 outlines the different approaches to sacramental preparation in the seven schools:

Table 4.5: Approaches to Sacramental Preparation in Each of the Schools

Name of School	Approach to Sacramental Preparation	Content Used
School A	Sacramental preparation takes place in the parish after school	N/A
School B	Sacramental preparation takes place in the parish after school	N/A
School C	Children are removed from GMGY class for twelve 40 minute classes in 2 nd Class	Adaptation of themes from ‘Grow in Love’
School D	Children are removed from one GMGY class every week in 2 nd Class	Teachers designed their own catechetical programme
School E	Sacramental preparation takes place in the parish after school	N/A
School F	Children are removed from one GMGY class every week in 2 nd Class.	My First Holy Communion and Penance: Jesus is My Special Friend - CJ Fallon
School G	Children are removed from GMGY class for twelve hours of sacramental preparation. Two hours are spent rehearsing in the Church with teachers and parish.	Teachers designed their own catechetical programme

The relationship with the local parish was also clearly a factor in how sacramental preparation was managed in the schools. For example P2 said, ‘they have been so flexible and want to fit in with what suits us as well’. While T1 in another school stated:

The parish absolutely really dislike the CNS model. We have had many meetings with them and they just don’t want anything to do with us at all ...they have openly said that they don’t agree with parents choosing a non-Catholic school for their Catholic children.

T3 described how their school was put in a difficult position by their local priest who ‘...decided that certain schools were maybe spending more time than others [on sacramental preparation]’. He called the children from each school in the parish up on to the altar to say a prayer or sing a song and T3 described her embarrassment saying, ‘...it immediately became very apparent if your school wasn’t spending as much time as the local Catholic school on their preparation for the sacraments’.

4.5.2 Inequality of Provision

The issue of the inequality of provision for all belief groups in the schools arose among the interviewees again in the context of sacramental preparation. T4 stated: ‘we cater for Catholics in a different way as in we allow them to make their communion and their confirmation within the school day’. T1 wondered why, in the interest of fairness, their schools were not preparing the other Christian groups as well. However, one of the interview questions asked of all of the interviewees was whether any other faith groups seek similar support for rites of initiation in the school. All interviewees said no. The sense that there is a bias towards Roman Catholic children implicit in the GMGY programme arose in three of the interviews:

P4: I have seen a really comprehensive document on how the core programme prepares children for their first holy communion and I think it’s a bit of a coincidence that somehow this combination of lessons has done this so well. What was in the mind of the author when writing the lessons if it just so happens that...every single element of what you are looking for in your catholic education is catered for.

T5: ...you don't want to appear that Catholic children are given an extra boost in the Community National schools because of a historical link with certain ETBs and the Catholic Church.

A parent also suggested this in one of the open-ended questions in the questionnaire, saying;

PT11: ... the programme has thought (*sic*) our child that Catholic religion is the right religion. Not good!!!

4.5.3 The Need for Regulation of Sacramental Preparation

There was a request from three of the interviewees that a policy be devised by the CNS patron in conjunction with the Catholic Church that would regulate the practice of sacramental preparation in Community National schools. They sought clarity on what was expected from the school, the parish and the parents regarding sacramental preparation:

P5: It needs to be stressed to parents that it is a three pronged approach; home, school and parish...the Catholic faith in Ireland has left a lot of responsibility to the school which I don't think is fair.

4.5.4 The Response of Parents to Sacramental Preparation

In one of the open-ended questions in the questionnaire parents were asked a general question about how their Community National school supports their family and community in celebrating important religious festivals or events (e.g. First Communion / Eid / Diwali). There were 76 responses to this question and 23 parents made reference to first communion. Many respondents simply stated that their child was still in a junior class and had not reached first communion age yet. Eleven parents commented on their appreciation that the sacrament was facilitated or taught in the school, for example:

PT82: My son will be making his communion next year and I am delighted that the school facilitates this.

PT98: They help with preparation for Holy Communion, but we are expected to help also. It's good that some of it is done within school time.

Three parents expressed dissatisfaction with the school's approach to sacramental preparation and two of them were from another Christian denomination:

PT5: Not as supportive as I would have expected for First Communion.

PT19: Christians are supposed to do communions and conformations (*sic*) because my daughters friends did there's and they are Christians.

PT30: All of my daughters friends that are Christians did them and in [name of school] they don't and my daughter feels left out so Christians should do Cumminion (*sic*) and conformations (*sic*) because Christians and Catholics are practically the same.

4.5.5 Sacraments and CNS Identity

Two of the interviewees spoke about how the facilitation of sacramental preparation during school hours was an important dimension of Community National school identity. There seems to be parental demand that the school plays a key role in the process and P4 stated: 'to get CNS to grow I think that [sacramental preparation] will be a huge selling point for it but I think there are other ways around it'. Another principal suggested that the school's ability to play a role in sacramental preparation during school hours was a way of attracting indigenous Irish parents to the school model:

P7: We have a school with very few Irish children and we need Irish children as well in order for a more meaningful education experience for everybody. Nobody wants a school that is only for children of international newcomers. We want a more inclusive society and it's unfortunate that that hinges on religion in Ireland.

4.6 Major Theme 3: Celebration of Festivals

All interviewees were asked how their school engages in rituals and marks religious festivals. There were different approaches taken in each school depending on the beliefs of the children attending their schools. All of the schools select a small number of religious festivals that are heavily represented in their school to celebrate each year. Festivals and times of significance were also highlighted in the classroom, depending on the beliefs of the children in each class. Christmas and Eid Al-Adha or Eid Al-Fitr (if they fall within school term) were celebrated in all of the schools interviewed and some of the schools also mark Diwali. P2 explained the challenge the schools face in selecting the festivals to celebrate:

With 61 different nationalities and an excess of 20 different religions... you don't want to be too overt around some religions and not so much around others... of course there are majorities but we still want to be mindful of the ones that would be less represented within our student population.

It was acknowledged by most of the interviewees that it is impossible to celebrate every festival represented in the schools and that there is also diversity within the religious traditions as to how and when the festivals are celebrated:

P7: It is really hard to be equitable and I'm really aware of the fact that sometimes we are not always that equitable in terms of are we respecting everybody's beliefs. Even among the Christian community, you know, how some people celebrate Easter at different times or how they celebrate Christmas can be quite different.

A parent in an open-question in the questionnaire reinforced this point stating: 'the school is not being interested in our child's religion and excluding the different dates on Easter. Not impressed' (PT11).

There was also an awareness among three interviewees that significant festivals in Irish society and the holidays on the school calendar very much revolve around Christian celebrations. A Muslim parent commented on this in the questionnaire for parents, saying:

PT15: My child is not supported with religious festivals, because whenever it's Eid Festivals it's a normal day for school. It's not like whenever it's Christmas, kids they don't go to school. I wish she can have holiday for Eid (*sic*).

The approach taken in the different schools to religious festivals varied. Some schools have occasional whole-school assemblies but mostly the celebrations were acknowledged in the classrooms and through artwork around the school. There was also a strong focus on the involvement of parents in some of the schools. Three out of the seven schools invite parents into the school for coffee mornings to mark the occasion and learn about the significance of the religious festival for the faith group.

The following table outlines the different approaches taken in each of the seven schools:

Table 4.6: Approaches to Religious Celebrations in each of the Schools

School	Approach to Celebrations
School A	Coffee Morning for Parents; Parents of the faith group visit each class and also speak at a coffee morning for parents.
School B	Story-based learning on the celebration in classes. Children are invited to speak about their own traditions and bring in artefacts.
School C	Winter Show; Inter-Cultural Display area; Story-based learning on the celebrations in classes.
School D	Parent Coffee Mornings; Classroom lessons on the beliefs of the each child in the class. Whole-School Assemblies; Winter Concert; A Multi-Belief Week.
School E	Coffee mornings for Parents; Winter Concert
School F	Story-based learning on the celebration in classes. A week of displays and classroom activities for each celebration.
School G	Whole-School Assemblies; Displays around the School; Parents are invited to share something of their celebration with the children in their child's class – food, card-making, wearing of special clothes etc.

One of the schools holds a Multi-Belief Week in the school. The children focus on the beliefs and traditions of various religions in class during the week and the parents are invited to set up tables in the school hall with symbols or sacred texts from their tradition. The parents are invited to interact with one another and learn from each other during the gathering.

4.6.1 Secular Approaches to Celebrations

It became apparent in all of the interviews that schools were highlighting the cultural and secular aspects of religious festivals. Artwork, food and traditional dress associated with particular festivals were encouraged in most of the schools. T5 stated, 'we do our best to

keep things as secular and as diluted as possible and as child-centred and as fun and as inviting and as community based as possible'. When referring to the Islamic celebration of Eid Al-Adha, T3 stated:

We have found that it is good to actually stick to the cultural side of the belief celebrations rather than going into the religious explanation, especially with the younger children... it's to keep it relatable to the child because, I suppose, if you went into the slaughter of the lambs it could get difficult!

Three of the schools taught the religious story in the classroom associated with the festival where appropriate. T4 described how the story of Sita in the Hindu tradition was displayed on the noticeboard in the school:

I have a Hindu in my class at the moment and her family were delighted... Now I wouldn't go too deep into the religious meanings or anything like that but the kids would be read the stories or shown a video.

4.6.2 Christmas

The celebration of Christmas in the schools arose as an issue in the data for both the schools and some parents. Many of the interviewees expressed a caution around the celebration of Christmas in their schools. There was a feeling among many of the interviewees that there was enough done for Christmas outside of school; P4 said, 'we don't have a big theme of Christmas...well they have enough of it outside school, we don't do any decorations or anything like that'. Many of the schools have replaced their Christmas celebration or concert with the title 'Winter Show'. T5 said, 'we call them winter shows and they are very secular, like Cinderella, Jack and the Beanstalk so it's not about Christmas and that has worked. I think that's probably fairer and correct'. P2 from another school echoed this saying:

Rather than say a Christmas carol service or anything because obviously that would be well supported but it wouldn't reflect our full community so we have winter performances where the religious aspect of that would be taken out and it's more a celebration of the time of year.

P5 explained that they felt they needed to call the Christmas Service a 'Winter Assembly' this year because in previous years a number of parents who were not Christian would withdraw their children from the event.

It is of note that a number of parents raised this as an issue in the questionnaire when asked an open-question as to how their Community National school supports their family and community in celebrating important religious festivals or events. Ten parents objected to the perceived dumbing down of the celebration of Christmas. PT55 said: 'they don't seem to celebrate Christmas at our school which is unfair to Christians'. Other examples of responses from parents are:

PT90: We celebrate all religions - sometimes I feel however that we don't celebrate our own religion (ie no Christmas carols were sung at the winter concert) I feel this is wrong as my child celebrates other festivals.

PT3: I find we celebrate other religious festivals but when it comes to Christmas I find the school is a bit hesitant to offend other religions. We have a Winter concert and not a Christmas concert. It is like we cannot use the word Christmas. This is a Christian celebration and we should celebrate it as we do Eid and Diwali.

Two of the principals interviewed showed an awareness of this approach to Christmas in their school. P2 said, 'maybe it's trying to cater for all but then almost brushing the dominant one [Christmas] under the carpet somewhat'. P4 also stated:

We also have to be careful not to be too mean to the majority because I find we are so cognisant of the minority that sometimes we nearly forgot about the Christmas [coffee] morning.

4.6.3 Halloween

The celebration of Halloween also arose as an issue in the schools and the schools approach it differently. All of the schools were aware that Halloween is a celebration that affronts the beliefs of some minority groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and some Pentecostal churches. Two of the schools explicitly celebrated Halloween. One of the schools did not acknowledge Halloween and the remaining four schools had a 'fancy-dress day' without explicitly focusing on Halloween and hanging Halloween decorations in the school. T4 stated:

The majority of the students celebrate Halloween no matter what their religion is, the Muslims here celebrate it, the Hindus celebrate it and

they have no problem...we stay away from saying ‘We are celebrating Halloween’ but we do have a fancy dress day.

Halloween came up as an issue for some of the parents in the questionnaire. When asked to describe any challenges they may encounter due to their religious beliefs in the school, eight parents mentioned Halloween. Five of the parents simply stated that Halloween was contrary to their religious beliefs. The other three parents commented on the communication from the school and use of language. There was a sense again that an Irish traditional celebration was being diluted in order to cater for a minority belief. PT8 stated: ‘the school doesn't celebrate Xmas and Halloween because of other religions yet are kids celebrating their beliefs? - it's not right’. PT 22 also said:

One thing I wasn't happy with is that any communication we received in relation to what we call "Halloween" wasn't referred to as this. This meant a lot of families were confused as to whether normal clothes meant fancy dress or not. It seems for catholic / Irish events the name of the celebration is not used. I don't get this as Eid was openly called out as a celebration.

4.6.4 Response of Parents to Festival Celebrations

In the questionnaire for parents 84% were generally in favour of their children participating in celebrations of different religious festivals in the school:

Table 4.7 Analysis of Parents' Responses to Q. 6

Q.6 I am happy for my child to participate in celebrations of different religious festivals in school (e.g. Christmas, Diwali, Eid)		
	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	66	41%
Agree	70	43%
Unsure	15	9%
Disagree	7	4%
Strongly Disagree	4	2%
No Response	5	

Similarly, a majority of the parent respondents (87%) were generally in favour of their child participating in secular festivals in the school:

Table 4.8 Analysis of Parents' Responses to Q. 7

Q.7 I am happy for my child to participate in celebrations of different secular festivals in school (e.g. Halloween)		
	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	73	45%
Agree	68	42%
Unsure	9	6%
Disagree	8	5%
Strongly Disagree	4	2%
No Response	5	

It was also evident from the interviews with principals and teachers that there was a strong focus on the involvement of parents during different religious times of celebration. Coffee mornings for parents were a feature in three of the schools. Parents from the belief tradition being celebrated were invited to speak to all of the parents gathered about their faith and practices associated with the celebration. P4 commented on how important it was for children to witness their parents engaging in these inter-belief activities.

Table 4.9 Selection of Comments from Parents Regarding Religious Festivals

'We do not celebrate the religious aspect of any festivals' (PT15)
'Hasn't supported at all' (PT89)
'The school is very supportive with every religion including ours' (PT101)
'I feel more could have been done and also for the principal to show some interest in the occasions' (PT50)
'Roman Catholic religious celebrations are not allowed as much as other religions' (PT7)
'Really don't like it, think this stuff should not be forced on kids' (PT25)
'I do not expect school to support my religious events' (PT41)
'The school has played a very important role bringing both family and community together to celebrate the different festivals and events. Which I feel is very important living in such a diverse community' (PT151)

This table is a sample of some of the responses from parents to an open question in the questionnaire asking them how the school supported them in celebrating religious festivals or events. Seventy-six parents replied. Sixty-two parents (82%) were either happy with the support or unsure because they had no experience of it yet. Fourteen respondents (18%) were critical.

4.6.5 The Effectiveness of the Celebrations

Two of the interviewees spoke of an uncertainty within themselves about the celebration of festivals in their schools and questioned how effective the overt recognition of the festivals are. And P7 said:

we can't be just celebrating day in day out, and it's one of the big challenges of a school like this where you don't want to be just constantly on a rollercoaster of coffee morning celebrations... that's why we have brought it back to respect and dignity because that is the only way I can actually see it working.

P4 also felt that 'people are sick of coming in for cups of coffee' and believed that Community National schools will soon be 'evolving past these big days'. P4 went on to focus on the importance of:

...concentrating on embedding really respectful dialogue and practices as opposed to 'now put on this sari...bring in a bit of food' and these big obvious displays of diversity.

4.7 Minor Sub-Theme: The Use of Symbols

Closely linked to the theme of festivals was the theme of symbols and whether the schools display symbols reflecting beliefs around the schools. What emerged from the data was that there was a lack of consensus among the principals and teachers as to whether symbols associated with various religions and beliefs should be displayed in the school. Two of the schools had permanent multi-belief displays in their foyers as seen below in Figures 4.3 and 4.4:



Figure 4.3 Multi-Belief Space in School D



Figure 4.4 Multi-Belief Space in School G

One school was in the process of developing a multi-belief space. Two of the schools only displayed symbols during festival celebrations and the remaining two schools were opposed to the display of symbols. T3 was in favour of a multi-belief space in the school stating:

I think the belief space is a lovely idea and I think it's something that should probably be in all schools just for parents and for children to know that their belief is welcome in the school, that there is an awareness about their belief in the school and that they have a place to go where they know that their belief is represented.

In contrast, P7 stated:

As a principal, I've made a calculated decision not to do that...I just think that school is about so much more than religion and I hate the fact that it's always brought back to religion because we really are worth more than the sum of that.

It is interesting to note that, despite its prevalence in the literature, the wearing of religious symbols or garments, such as the hijab, did not arise as an issue in any of the Community National schools for teachers, principals or parents. Girls are allowed to wear the hijab in the schools once it matches the colour of the school uniform.

4.7.1 Symbols and Religious Festivals

All of the schools in this research project displayed symbols or art-work connected to the various beliefs in their schools during important festivals. These would then be removed once the celebration was over. Interviewees mentioned 'Eid art', 'Diwali Lamps', 'Easter Bunnies', 'Christmas Trees', 'Santa Claus' and 'Cribs'. Regarding the Christian celebration of Christmas, two principals stated:

P3: For Christmas it's very difficult. I think Christmas has become more cultural than religious. It's very much Santa, Christmas trees, I suppose the star...stars would be our main symbol.

P6: We are careful in that regard [crib] that we don't bring in what we would deem as the statues and the idol material that might be perceived as Catholic or by other groups as offensive.

The display of a Crib at Christmas time was mentioned by four of the interviewees as a feature in their schools. One teacher (T3) described a debate in her staff room regarding the display of a Crib in the school:

A lot of people felt that if the crib was given a specific space in the school that might be seen as veneration whereas if it was a teaching resource that could be passed around the classrooms to have a look at when you are talking about Christmas then it's something different.

4.8 Major Theme 4: Encounter Between School Ethos and Parental Values

Although interviewees were not asked directly about the ethos of Community National schools, a number of them mentioned it. It was described by two principals as 'Love and Respect'(P1) and 'Respect and Dignity'(P7). Others stated:

P3: We have a multi-belief environment where we do not exclude children on the basis of their faith.

T3: We are diverse, we are different but at the same time there is a great sense of community.

P6: The fact that we have so many different groups here is making us who we are and it is really opening up our community as a microcosm of what society is like.

There was a strong response from parents in the questionnaire regarding their motivation in choosing a Community National school for their child. As presented in Figure 4.5, 76% of parents were in favour of an inclusive ethos, catering for all faiths and beliefs. However, 24% disagreed or were unsure.

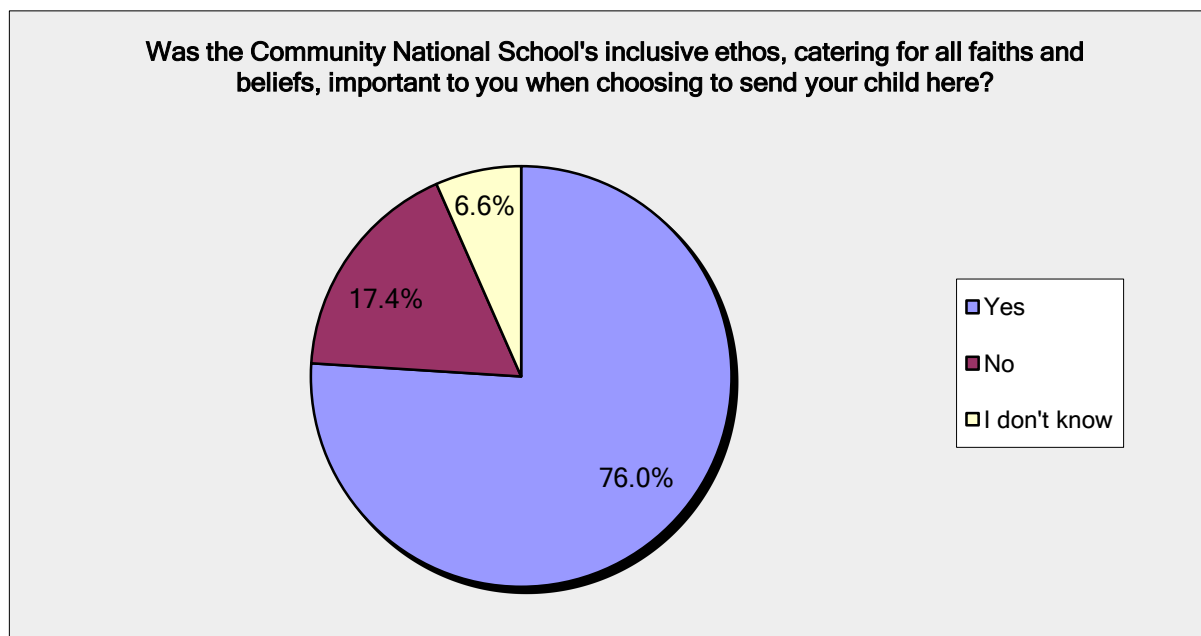


Figure 4.5: Parental Responses to Q. 2

Jehovah's Witnesses were mentioned by four of the interviewees as a group that tend to withdraw from many of the inter-belief activities and celebrations that reflect the inclusive ethos in the schools. P4 described this dilemma well:

I suppose to us it can feel disappointing because that is the whole ethos of the school and we try to respect them as much as possible but the only way we can come to terms with that is thinking we are respecting them by exempting them.

A parent who is a Jehovah's Witnesses made reference to this in an open-question in the questionnaire, stating: 'We do not engage in religious and patriotic celebrations which take place at school. Principal and teachers respect this, I truly appreciate this'(PT28).

Three of the interviewees argued that Community National schools focus too much on the religious identity of children when they speak in terms of diversity and ethos. Two of the interviewees spoke about how the GMGY programme helped the schools manifest its ethos but three others disagreed, believing that their ethos was more far-reaching. For example, P4 stated:

I think we have now outgrown GMGY...we want...an equality-based school which is a school that sees religious identity as *one* aspect of a child's identity.

4.8.1 Conflicting Values and Religious Belief

Equality and values were mentioned by four of the interviewees. They were aware of the fact that Community National schools are state-run public schools and therefore operate out of the democratic values of the Irish state. P4 stated, 'our public values may be quite liberal in some ways [but] we are a State school and that is really, really important'. A parent in the questionnaire also raised the issue of conflicting values:

PT8: Religion is a style of life for us. My child has to face different points of view in many situations - i.e. for us family means mom, dad and children. Two people the same gender and children is not a real family for us - it breaks God's rules.

T5 spoke about a parent objecting to homosexuality being tolerated in the school; 'it's a State school, it's the constitution of the land so we have a little bit of protection there actually on those issues'. A similar case was raised in another school when the principal was challenged by a parent who had issues with same-sex marriage and the fact that this would be respected in a Community National school. P4's response to the parent was:

I suppose what you have to do now with your child is prepare them for, and deepen whatever values you have at home, make sure that your children are aware of that and that they are comfortable enough to be able to hear other perspectives and see other perspectives without totally taking it on.

Therefore, in Community National schools, parents are encouraged to instil their family values, as well as their religious identities, within their children and are assured that their child has the right to express these values, once it is done in a respectful way.

It was interesting to note that the questions relating to diet in the interviews and questionnaires did not arise as significant issues for the interviewees or the parents. One parent commented that fasting was part of their faith and 'the school should read up on it' (PT70). One other parent mentioned 'Halloween sweets' as problematic. The remaining parents who commented all stated that they prepare their child's school lunch so the school

does not have to cater for their dietary needs. All interviewees stated that religious diet did not pose a significant challenge within their schools.

4.9 Minor Sub-Theme: Curricular Issues

Connected to the theme of conflicting values and religious belief is the area of curriculum. Interviewees mentioned different subject areas that can raise issues for some parents. The subjects mentioned were Music and Singing; Physical Education (PE) and Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE). All of the interviewees emphasised the need for clear communication and dialogue with parents and the value of ‘listening to what their concerns are’ (P2). Parents seemed willing to compromise once it was explained that the subject was part of the Irish curriculum for schools. T3 spoke about the need for compromise and understanding and how some Islamic parents agreed that ‘as long as modesty is respected and the girls aren’t asked to dance with the boys it’s fine’.

T4 highlighted the fact that the Irish curriculum is not inclusive enough especially in the lead up to Halloween and Christmas. She gave the example of the Music curriculum and how most of the songs for children to learn in December were religious-based.

Trust was also mentioned as essential element when negotiating curricular issues with parents. P4 described the reaction of some Muslim parents when the school explained the objectives of the RSE programme: ‘We trust this school, you respect us so much. If you think this is what our children need, you go for it’. P1 also emphasised the importance of trust between the school and parents: ‘I would say our whole school is built on trust and that has actually [been said] by our parents...we don’t shy away from dialogue’.

4.10 Major Theme 5: Training and CPD of Teachers

All of the interviewees unequivocally stated that teachers are not adequately prepared in initial teacher-training colleges in Ireland to teach and enhance plurality in Community National schools. The homogeneity of the teaching profession was mentioned as an issue as well as the ‘lowly ranked’(T3) place of multi-denominational education in teacher-training colleges. Four of the interviewees remarked that student teachers are not as well prepared for multi-belief educational settings as they are for Catholic schools.

Three interviewees acknowledged that teacher-training colleges could only do so much and nothing could replace the value of experience and strong leadership:

P5: you can get all the lectures and all the talks and all the information and attend all the seminars but until you actually come face to face and walk through the situation yourself, you learn from it that way.

P1: I think it's really dependent on the leader. I would often talk to the staff ...and they would say they need the language and they are frantically writing what I am saying...when they go into any organisation they are going to have to be inducted into that way of thinking.

Two of the interviewees spoke about the importance of continuing professional development in the area of reflective practice. There is a necessity for teachers, particularly in multi-belief environments, to be aware of their own bias, presumptions and prejudice about different beliefs and cultures is essential to create 'a classroom culture that reinforces positive engagements between pupils' (T3). Teachers and principals need to be reflective practitioners and 'park their presumptions at the door' (T3) when entering into inter-belief dialogue with children or parents. Two other specific areas named in interviews that teachers required continuing professional development in Community National schools were:

- (i) Equipping teachers with the skills to facilitate inter-belief dialogue;
- (ii) A policy in schools and training for teachers on how to respond to global incidents related to religious extremism with children in the classroom.

4.11 Summary of Findings

Findings from this study indicate that the GMGY Multi-Belief programme from Junior Infants to Second Class raises considerable challenges for the participants in this research. The aim of the programme to nurture belief and facilitate inter-belief dialogue seems to pose the most difficulties for schools and parents. There is also strong evidence to suggest that there is an inequality in terms of how the different belief groups are accommodated.

The findings also reveal that Sacramental Preparation is not regulated in Community National schools. Some schools remove Roman Catholic children from the GMGY core programme in order to fulfil the necessary hours of sacramental preparation due to requests

from their parishes. This goes beyond the remit of the schools and also creates a perceived bias towards Roman Catholic children in Community National schools.

There is evidence in the findings that there is not a consensus between the different stakeholders in the schools approached for this research regarding the celebration of festivals and the use of symbols pertaining to beliefs in Community National schools. Findings also point to a secular celebration of some of the major festivals and in some cases a dumbing-down of the festivals connected to the majority belief, namely Christianity and Irish culture.

The findings strongly suggest that there is also an uneasy tension between some parents and schools regarding the values and guiding principles of the Community National schools and the GMGY programme.

The findings also reveal that while there is a deep level of commitment to plurality and equality in Community National schools there is also a sense of vulnerability and lack of confidence and training among teachers and principals.

An interpretation of these findings is presented in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER 5 INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the findings from Chapter Four in light of the historical context of Community National schools presented in Chapter One and the existing literature on the challenges of religious diversity in public schooling indicated in Chapter Two. An analysis of key issues that emerged from the themes presented in Chapter Four will be outlined in the following sections. As we have seen, the issues being grappled with by the stakeholders in this new model of schooling are complex. Considering the relationship between the historical educational context in Ireland and the recent growth in religious plurality in Irish society (Bryan 2008) the integrity and commitment of Community National schools in providing inclusive education requires recognition.

5.2 The Strengths and Limitations of the GMGY Programme

An analysis of the data findings reveals that all of the teachers and principals interviewed were in favour of the narrative, story-based approach of the GMGY programme from Junior Infants to Second Class. They commended the pitch and underlined the enjoyment of the stories by the children (Faas et al. 2017b). They also acknowledged the capacity of this approach to give agency to the child in their engagement with the various themes. This approach resonates with authors examined in the literature review who advocate the agency of the child in religious education (Erricker and Erricker 2000; Wardekker and Miedema 2001). However, limitations to the GMGY programme were also expressed in the findings.

5.2.1 Finding 1: Poor Religious Literacy in Young Children

Many of the interviewees suggested that one of the central aims of the programme, to encourage the children to engage with the lesson from their own belief perspectives, was largely lost. There was a strong sense among the teachers and principals that parents were not engaging with the GMGY themes at home, which is essential to the success of the aims and learning objectives as set out in the programme (Murphy 2013; NCCA 2015a). Just over half of the parents (51%) in this research stated that they do not engage with the GMGY

programme at home. However, 49% stated that they do engage in the programme with their children.

An interesting finding was the assertion by some interviewees that there was a lack of religious literacy in the children. They expressed frustration that parental beliefs were not being imparted in the home or community and children did not have a language to express their beliefs. While this may be true in many cases, it is important to consider the age of the pupils (4–8 years) and the fact that they are only beginning to establish and name their identity and belief tradition. It can be argued that the use of imaginative interaction with the GMGY stories as well as with their own life experiences as children has rich potential for nurturing children's belief (Fowler 1981). The emphasis on open conversation and reflection in the lessons also creates a safe and open environment for existential issues to emerge and be explored by the children with their teacher (Erricker and Erricker 2000; Ní Shúilleabháin 2004; Council of Europe 2007; Jackson 2014). Religious literacy and a sense of being rooted in their tradition (Van Nieuwenhove 2013) may be too much to expect from children between the ages of four and eight. However, the support and responsibilities of the parents and community of practice is still essential. The child's belief can only be nurtured if there is a belief being imparted in the home. It was interesting to note that some interviewees observed that children from some minority beliefs seemed to be more rooted in their tradition and articulate about their beliefs. This may reflect the importance of identity and tradition to some minority cultures.

5.2.2 Finding 2: A Lack of Clarity Around Language

Analysis of the findings suggests that the term 'belief nurture' creates difficulty for the teachers and principals in this research. The Junior GMGY programme seeks to 'cultivate' and enhance the children's 'human flourishing' (NCCA 2014b) and to provide a safe space for the nurturing of the child's exploration of questions important to their life experience. However, all of the teachers expressed a discomfort around nurturing belief and facilitating inter-belief conversation in the classroom. This may be due to the fact that the terms 'belief nurture' and 'inter-belief conversation' do not seem to have been adequately clarified and teased out with teachers.

It is clear from the data that a distinction does not seem to have been made between inter-belief conversation and inter-belief dialogue (Cullen 2006). The terms are used interchangeably in the data. Findings highlight an uncertainty among the teachers regarding their role as facilitators of conversations in GMGY lessons. Many seemed to confuse it with the more traditional role of providing faith-formation. This confusion and frustration for teachers may be due to the evident lack of religious identity and literacy among many of the children. A number of the interviewees stated that this was largely the case with the Roman Catholic children in particular. Once again, this points to the need for parents and communities to engage with their children's religious education rather than depend on the school to provide it (Faas et al. 2017b). The school cannot operate in a vacuum.

There was a lack of consensus among the interviewees as to whether Community National schools should even be striving to nurture belief and whether they have the right to do so. However, the vast majority of parents surveyed (82%) were in agreement that Community National schools should have a role in *nurturing* their child's belief. Some expressed unease.

While it is not the focus of this research, it is interesting to note that the senior GMGY Programme (third to sixth class), defines belief nurture as 'the process that occurs during a child's interaction with the teaching and learning supported by the curriculum. It is through a child's engagement with this teaching and learning that their sense of belief is nurtured' (NCCA 2016a, p. 5). Skills and dispositions such as respectful listening, empathy and personal expression are developed to support this process. The difficulty that this research identifies is that many teachers and principals understand belief nurture to mean faith formation. Furthermore, faith formation is being offered to Roman Catholics and not to the other belief communities.

5.2.3 Finding 3: Belief-Specific Teaching: Equality of Opportunity?

The belief-specific component of the GMGY programme presented as the most challenging aspect of the programme for eleven out of the twelve interviewees in this research. There was strong evidence that interviewees feel there is an inequality in terms of how the different belief groups are accommodated in the GMGY programme. Designating the children into separate and broad categories of belief created deep discomfort among the principals and

teachers and does not take into account the lack of uniformity within the beliefs. The Humanist/Buddhist/Hindu (HBH) category created the most concern among all of the interviewees. It was described as ‘othering,’ ‘disrespectful’ and against the human rights of the children (OSCE 2007; Council of Europe, 2008). This goes against a fundamental principle of common schooling that common schools provide equal educational experiences for children (Halstead 2007).

One principal acknowledged that it is impossible to be all things to all people and all beliefs, but the belief specific component of GMGY was a gesture, an acknowledgment of differences. It was also suggested that some parents were appreciative of the fact that their belief identity was being recognised and honoured. NCCA literature states that children are grouped according to their beliefs ‘as far as possible’ (2014b). Hogan (2011) recommends that in the balancing exercise of trying to accommodate majority and minority groups ‘reasonable accommodation as a principled framework for decision-making’ (p. 556) is the most realistic approach. However, Hogan was writing from a denominational, inclusive perspective. Other literature from a public schooling perspective would question this approach in terms of social justice and inclusion (Irwin 2009; Mawhinney, Niens, Richardson and Chiba 2010; MacDonagh 2012). While the rationale for belief specific teaching is to respect difference and encourage children in their own belief identity (NCCA 2014b), it is clear that there is a lack of equity in the approach taken. The research carried out by Faas et al (2017b) also confirmed this finding. Their research with children in Community National schools found that the children generally preferred not to be separated into belief specific classes. Most of the children from religions other than Roman Catholic reported that they learned about their faith at home or outside school. Some Muslim children expressed boredom with the belief specific lessons. Hindu children and children with secular beliefs experienced no difference between the belief specific lessons and the core programme due to the lack of explicit religious content in the HBH lessons. The group that seems to be benefiting most from belief specific teaching is the Roman Catholic group (Faas et al. 2017b).

It is important to note that whilst parents were not specifically asked about their reaction to belief specific teaching in the parental questionnaire, no parent mentioned or

objected to this aspect of the GMGY programme. A small number of parents commented that they felt that their beliefs were not valued in their schools (Mawhinney, Niens, Richardson and Chiba 2010) but no parent mentioned belief specific teaching as an issue. Findings in this research suggests that the discomfort seems to lie entirely with the teachers and principals. Does this point to a lack of understanding of the programme on the part of parents? Or do most of the parents appreciate the efforts taken by the Community National schools to recognise and support their family beliefs in so far as the school can? These questions merit further research.

5.2.4 Finding 4: Evidence of a Roman Catholic Bias

A discomfort with a Christo-normative bias emerged in the findings (MacDonald 2015). Roman Catholic children were perceived by some parents as well as teachers and principals as receiving different treatment to the rest of the pupils in Community National schools (Faas et al. 2017b). This may be partly due to the negotiations that took place between the Department of Education and the Catholic Bishops during the inception of the schools. Assurances were given that faith formation would be provided for Roman Catholic pupils during the school day (Edwards 2007; O’Kelly 2012). The term ‘faith formation’ was then changed by the NCCA to ‘belief nurture’ in 2014 (NCCA 2015). This may be one of the reasons for teacher’s confusion regarding their roles and expectations.

Former Minister Mary Hanafin stated that Community National schools would cater for the diversity of religious faiths represented in the area served by the school and provision would be made within the school setting for the religious, moral and ethical education of children in conformity with the wishes of their parents (Hanafin 2007). The GMGY programme was designed to fulfil this requirement.

Whilst the majority of parents in this research supported the guiding principles of the GMGY programme, two interviewees recounted a significant objection from a group of parents from a minority belief to the programme. Their objection resulted in the suspension of the teaching of the programme in one of the Community National schools for a number of years. These parents were concerned about the content of some of the stories and lessons in the GMGY programme. They undertook a detailed review of the programme and claimed that 83% of the GMGY material that makes specific reference to religion related solely to

Christian beliefs (Muslim Children's Parents Group 2014). They expressed strong objections to the narrative approach to religious education and called for an ethical programme, devoid of religious content to be provided by Community National schools. They were also deeply uncomfortable with classroom teachers engaging with their children about their religion in the belief specific lessons (Zaki 1982; Parker-Jenkins 1995). They claimed that Article 2 (Right to Education) of the European Convention on Human Rights was being violated: *'in the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions.'* (European Court of Human Rights 2012). This suggestion of Christo-normativity (MacDonald 2012) that emerged from this group of parents highlights the awareness and sensitivity of some minority groups to Christo-centric content in curricula (Salwar 1994; Parker-Jenkins and Masterson 2013). It also confirms the suggestion in literature that an imaginative, relativist approach to belief education does not appeal to all religious groups (Jackson 2004; Revell 2009).

Two principals also claimed that there was an implicit Roman Catholic bias in the GMGY programme. They wondered how and why the GMGY programme had the capacity to educate Roman Catholic children for the Sacraments of Reconciliation and First Eucharist. This suggests that the themes chosen in the Junior GMGY programme that explore the life and experience of the child all have the capacity to nurture Roman Catholic children towards preparation for the Sacraments of Initiation. Whilst GMGY seeks to encourage all children to grow in their beliefs, it was clear that the aforementioned parent's group was sensitive to a Christo-normative bias in the programme (Salwar 1994). Literature on the concept of post-secular schooling argues for the prominence of religions and beliefs in common schools, celebrated and recognised together on a level playing field; not valuing one more than the other (Boeve 2007; Fielding and Moss 2011; Watson 2013; Faas 2017a and b).

5.3 Different Approaches to the Celebration of Festivals and the Display of Symbols

The celebration of important belief and cultural events is recognised as a practical way of manifesting the Community National school inclusive ethos (CNS 2017). There is evidence from the findings that there are different approaches taken by the schools towards the

celebration of festivals and the use of symbols reflecting the various beliefs in the schools. While the autonomy of the schools and their different circumstances is important, it emerged in the findings that the principals had different stances on the matter.

5.3.1 Finding 1: Should Community National Schools Celebrate Festivals?

All of the Community National schools in this research celebrate a chosen number of religious and secular festivals each year to reflect the different belief communities in their schools. Different approaches are taken in each school. Some have whole-school events, others focus more on class events. Some schools prioritise parents in the celebrations, other schools do not. Some schools incorporate some religious content in the celebrations, some do not. There was an awareness among many of the interviewees that it was not possible to be equal in their approach to celebrating festivals; the schools could not possibly celebrate every festival of importance to every child in the school. However, there is evidence in the findings to suggest that some groups do feel marginalised and that their religion or worldview is not valued (Salwar 1994; MacDonald 2012).

Issues with two celebrations in popular Irish culture were highlighted in the findings. There was an evident tension regarding the celebration of Halloween (Homan 1991; Plater 2007, 2013) in the schools. Two of the schools explicitly celebrated it, one did not and the remaining four schools downplayed the celebration, calling it a ‘fancy-dress day’. All of the schools were aware that Halloween affronts some minority groups such as Jehovah’s Witnesses and Pentecostal churches who deem Halloween as a direct disregard of the Book of Deuteronomy which warns against demons, witchcraft or communicating with the dead (18:10-11). They did not want to cause offence to these groups. Christmas was also highlighted as an issue when celebrating festivals in the schools (Tanenbaum 2015). There was a clear reluctance among the interviewees to name Christmas and celebrate it with traditional carols or nativity plays. A ‘Winter Concert’ replaced the traditional celebrations in an effort to be more inclusive of minority groups.

However, the findings reveal a strong reaction from some parents to a perceived dilution of Christmas and Halloween celebrations in the schools. There was a sense from the responses that important festivals for minority groups were celebrated more overtly than the important festivals for the majority culture (Coelho 1998). 84% of parents responded that

they were in favour of their children participating in celebrations of different religious festivals and 87% were in favour of their child participating in a secular festival (e.g. Halloween) in the school. However, the principals and teachers interviewed in this research expressed a clear reluctance regarding the celebrations of the festivals most prevalent in Irish culture. They did not want children from minority beliefs to opt out of the celebrations or not attend school on those days and felt there was enough recognition of these festivals outside of school.

Some of the principals expressed an uncertainty within themselves about the overt celebrations of festivals for different beliefs and questioned how effective they were. The implications of these findings reinforce literature on this issue which cautions that the tendency to emphasise minority belief celebrations more than majority celebrations can result in an exoticising of minority cultures. It can actually contribute to emphasising that they are different and foreign to the norm. The celebrations can also run the risk of being tokenistic and possibly even trivialise the celebrations for all involved (Troyna 1987; Coelho 1998; Byron 2008; Hegarty and Titley 2013). It also seems apparent from the findings that indigenous Irish Catholic parents, the majority culture in the schools, are more comfortable than others with inclusiveness and embracing other beliefs and cultures, possibly due to the fact that they are the dominant culture and feel less marginalised.

This brings up the question of whether Community National schools should be overtly celebrating festivals or will the schools soon be ‘evolving past these big days’ as one principal suggested. However, a key principle in Community National schools is to respect, celebrate and recognise diversity in all areas of human life (NCCA 2015). The vast majority of parents were also in favour of these celebrations, with the exception of some Jehovah’s Witnesses (Liedgren 2016) and Atheist parents. CNS policy is clear that respect and understanding needs to be at the centre of the daily interactions in the schools between teachers, children and parents before any meaningful celebration of festivals can occur (CNS 2017). The uniqueness of each child and their beliefs can be recognised and celebrated in this everyday interaction. It is also acknowledged in the policy on meaningful celebrations that the recognition of belief and cultural occasions ‘is a practical way of demonstrating the school’s inclusive ethos’ (CNS 2017, p. 2). The recognition of such events however do not need to occur within the context of whole school events or overt celebrations. They could

also be acknowledged within class groups depending on what belief groups are represented in each class.

It is interesting to note that while issues in the literature pertaining to religious dietary needs and the wearing of religious garments such as the hijab influenced the formulation of the interview questions in this research, these areas did not emerge as challenges for any of the interviewees.

5.3.2 Finding 2: Contrasting Views on the Display of Symbols

There is evidence from the findings that there is a lack of consensus between the schools regarding the display of symbols reflecting different beliefs in the schools. Some schools gave significant recognition to the various beliefs in their schools through a dedicated Multi-Belief space in their foyers. Others did not display any symbols, either because it was not a priority or they ideologically objected to it. This points to contrasting views among principals on the fundamental values of Community National schools. Those who objected to or questioned the need to display the symbols of the beliefs in their schools seem to be operating out of McLaughlin's description of a secular common school approach rather than an inclusive one (McLaughlin 1995).

The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism Report (2012), recognises the value of displaying religious and non-religious artefacts and recommends that Boards of Management should develop school policy on the educational display of these symbols in the school: 'Such displays ought not to be exclusive to any one faith or tradition but should have a balance, reflective of the beliefs of children attending the schools' (p. 93). It is interesting that the Forum Report focuses on the fact that the display of symbols associated with religions and beliefs has an educational value. Interviewees in this research focused strongly on the sense of belonging and recognition it afforded to the belief communities in their schools. This suggests that equality is important in terms of what symbols are displayed in Community National schools; all beliefs in the school should be reflected or at the very least, be invited to be reflected.

There was also an interesting finding regarding the choice of symbols for celebrations. A secular approach to the celebration of festivals was favoured in all of the

schools (CNS 2017). Some schools, however, carefully highlighted the religious aspect of some of the festivals through story or symbol, believing this to be important. Other schools did not. This again points to a lack of consensus among the schools regarding the appropriateness of displaying religious images.

5.4 Tension Between Public and Private Values

Findings suggest that an uneasy tension exists between some parents and schools regarding the values and ethos of the Community National schools. 76% of parents in this research stated that the inclusive ethos of catering for all faiths and beliefs in Community National schools was important when choosing to send their child to the school. However, it has been evident throughout the research process that there is a small cohort of parents that express contrary values to the liberal, democratic values underpinning Community National schools. Ipgrave's research (1999) highlights the difficulty faced by public schools when trying to foster the value of openness towards diversity and engage with parents from faith communities that regard such openness as 'fraught with dangers' (p. 148).

Issues with homosexuality and respect for same-sex marriage were mentioned by interviewees as matters that arose for some parents as a difficulty. Their private values concerning these matters were in contrast to the values promoted in the schools. Whilst these are matters that arise and need to be addressed in all school types, it was clearly stated by some interviewees that Community National schools were bound and protected by the liberal, democratic values of the Irish state (Halstead 2007). The schools hold at their core a respect for everyone's right to freedom of religion and belief (OSCE 2007; Alexander and McLaughlin 2003). Halstead (2007) states that one of the aims of common, public schooling is to educate children in the shared values of justice, equality and rationality. However, this research highlights that these values are not always shared and can be at odds with some parent's beliefs. It can be argued that publically-funded schools must ensure they provide a forum for open and respectful sharing and debate rather than seeking consensus (Fielding and Moss 2011; Watson 2013). The responsibility of parents is strongly emphasised in the data regarding their role in imparting the values of their family, culture and belief community.

A small number of parents with atheist beliefs also expressed an unease with the Community National school's ethos of seeking to nurture all beliefs in the school. There was a sense of frustration that there was a predisposition to the existence of God in the schools and that their children would be perceived as different or lacking due to their lack of belief in a God. They argued that religion should not be taught in public schools and is a private matter (Nugent and Donnelly 2013; O'Toole 2015). Equally, two of the interviewees also indicated that they believed faith and religion were private matters and that Community Nationals schools should not be engaging in belief nurture. This reveals that a tension also exists among the Community Nationals schools whether they should be inclusive common schools or secular common schools (McLaughlin 1995).

Curriculum also arose as an issue in the findings regarding conflicting values and religious belief. Curriculum subjects that were mentioned were Music, Physical Education (Keaton 2006; Hamzeh and Oliver 2012; Selim 2014) and Relationship and Sexuality Education (Selim 2014). However, with the exception of the Muslim Children's Parents Group (2014), curricular issues for parents did not seem to pose a significant challenge for the schools once the principals and teachers listened to the concerns of parents and explained that the subject was part of the Irish curriculum for schools. The importance of dialogue, compromise and listening were promoted by the interviewees as essential (Hegarty and Titley 2013). However, it was also acknowledged in the data that the Irish curriculum is not inclusive enough and has a tendency towards Christo-normativity. There was an awareness among some of the interviewees and some parents that the Christian calendar punctuates the Irish curriculum (Parker-Jenkins 1995; Devine 2011; MacDonald 2012; Parker-Jenkins and Masterson 2013; Smyth, Lyons and Darmody 2013).

5.5 Interface Between the Responsibility of Home, School and Communities

It is evident from the data that there is a lack of clarity and a blurring of lines between the roles and responsibilities of parents, Community National schools and the relevant communities of belief in terms of religious education.

5.5.1 Finding 1: The Role of CNS in Nurturing Belief

The role of national schools in the faith formation of Catholic children is deeply embedded in Ireland's historical relationship with the Roman Catholic church and the development of the national school system (Coolahan 1981; Williams 2005; Anderson et al 2016). The spiritual dimension of the child is also of central importance in the 1998 Education Act and the 1999 primary-school curriculum (Department of Education 1999). Primary schools in Ireland are expected to play an important role in the nurture of the religious identity of children (Fischer 2016).

The stated role of Community National schools in terms of provision for religious education is to *nurture* and *support* all children in their beliefs through the common multi-belief programme GMGY (NCCA 2015). The celebration of significant belief and cultural events is also rooted in the ethos of the schools (Community National schools 2017). However, the data reveals an uneasy tension between the schools in terms of provision and some of the parents of minority beliefs in terms of the religious education of their child. Some of the interviewees questioned the role of the school in nurturing belief and believed it to be impossible to do so for every child. Some parents of minority beliefs were also uncomfortable with the school assuming this role while the majority of parents supported it. This points to a lack of clarity around the aims of the GMGY programme and the role of the Community National school. Neither the programme nor the school are seeking to engage in faith formation.

The principles of common or public schools generally state that they provide an equality of provision for all children, educating them together and fostering a respect for difference (Halstead 2007; OSCE 2007; Council of Europe 2008). These schools are also often described as places for learning *about* and *from* different beliefs rather than instruction or nurture *into* a particular worldview (OSCE 2007, Council of Europe 2008, REDCo 2009). Community National schools seek to nurture belief and facilitate inter-belief conversation in their schools which is consistent with the aims of public schooling in liberal, democratic societies in Europe. However, as stated earlier, an ambivalence emerged among many of the interviewees regarding the word 'nurture' and a lack of clarity regarding what it actually entailed.

5.5.2 Finding 2: The Role of Parents as Primary Educators

Parents are recognised as the primary educators of their children and specifically so in terms of faith and belief (Constitution of Ireland, 1937, Art. 42.1). CNS literature also clearly states that parents are the primary educators of their children, and families and communities are responsible for passing on traditions, values and faiths/beliefs (NCCA 2014). 95% of the parents in this research agreed that they are the primary educators of their child in terms of values, beliefs and practices.

The engagement of parents with the GMGY lessons at home is central to the success of the programme (Murphy 2013; NCCA 2015). The data, however, revealed that there was a strong sense among the teachers and principals that this was not happening. 51% of parents stated that they do not engage with the GMGY programme at home. However, 49% state that they do engage with the programme with their child. This suggests a disengagement on the part of some parents regarding the religious education of their children. This may be due to the historical role occupied by the majority of national schools in terms of faith formation and learning *into* religion for Roman Catholic children. It is interesting to note that the data in this research reveals that 56% of the parents who state that they do engage with the GMGY programme with their child are Roman Catholics. The findings also reveal that 50% of the parents who do not engage with the GMGY programme identify as Roman Catholic. Therefore, despite the sense that many of the teachers and principals had that parents were not engaging with GMGY at home, there is a significant percentage of parents, who identify as Roman Catholic, that do take an interest in their child's faith development.

As stated earlier, national schools have been a significant locus for faith formation since the inception of the Irish state (Coolahan 1981; Williams 2005; Anderson et al. 2016). As a result, there is a perception that many Irish parents may have rescinded responsibility as the primary educators of their faith to Church-run schools. Faas et al (2017b) confirmed this finding, stating that Irish Roman Catholic children reported that school was a major source of religious knowledge whilst children from minority faiths said they received formation in their faith at home or in their communities. Community National schools, however, are not denominational schools and do not have a role in instructing children into their beliefs.

5.5.3 Finding 3: Different Expectations from Belief Communities

The ethos of Community National schools and the overarching principles of GMGY authorise a role for the schools in co-operating with all local faith communities through the GMGY programme when the need arises (NCCA 2014). To date this support has been provided for Roman Catholic children in the preparation for the Sacraments of Reconciliation and First Communion, in accordance with the wishes of parents. There is an observable issue in the findings that there are different expectations of the Community National schools, depending on the resources available in each Roman Catholic parish. Although preparation for the sacraments is understood as the role of the parents and the local parish (NCCA 2014, 2015), findings show that some schools remove Roman Catholic children from the GMGY core programme in order to fulfil the necessary requirements from their local parishes for sacramental preparation. This goes beyond the remit of the schools and also creates a perceived bias towards Roman Catholic children in Community National schools. This approach has also been described as inequitable (Educate Together 2011). The schools in parish communities that employ a parish catechist do not engage in sacramental preparation during the school day.

Findings also highlight that no other belief community has approached Community National schools seeking support with initiation rites. According to Faas (2017a and b) many minority faith children in Community National schools attended after-school classes for religious formation. They do not rely on the school to provide this learning. This would indicate that other belief communities of worship and parents are assuming the role required of them in the formation of their children's beliefs.

The Roman Catholic parish community is the focal point for faith development (Irish Episcopal Conference 2010). However, historically, the Catholic school has assumed a central role in the preparation of children for Sacraments. Publically-run, common schools in Ireland cannot be expected to continue this legacy. However, the Catholic bishops, in their engagement with the development of Community National schools in 2007, insisted that faith formation during the school day was a 'non-negotiable requirement' (O'Kelly 2012) for Catholic children.

In a recent conference address, Bishop Brendan Leahy stated that the Catholic

bishops have now indicated that they do not consider the belief specific component and sacramental preparation in Community National schools sufficient for the faith formation needs of Roman Catholic children (2017). He asks the pertinent question as to how the Catholic Church now needs to offer formation to these children.

Community National schools can support and encourage the children and parishes in their preparation for Sacraments but preparing the children catechetically during the school day and withdrawing them from the GMGY programme is contrary to the founding intentions of the schools and international guidelines for publically-managed schools (OSCE 2007; REDCo 2009). Faas (2017a) argues that this practice actively weakens claims to inclusivity and equality. The data also indicates that some parents from belief groups other than Roman Catholic have perceived this as an indication that the Catholic faith is more valued than other beliefs.

5.6 Challenges for Teachers

As already discussed, there is evidence in the findings that the aim of the GMGY programme to nurture belief and facilitate inter-belief conversation poses significant difficulties for teachers. A majority of the interviewees felt that they and their colleagues lack confidence and knowledge in this area and shy away from inter-belief conversation (Ipgrave 1999; Bryan 2010; Liedgren 2016). Teachers were described in the data as ‘vulnerable’, ‘fearful’ and ‘uncomfortable’. It was also queried as to why teachers were put in a ‘compromised position’ and asked to ‘teach faith’ in these schools when they are clearly publicly-run schools and do not have a role in the faith formation of children. As already stated, this seems to be due to an issue with language and a lack of understanding around the meaning of the terms ‘belief nurture’ and ‘inter-belief conversation’. GMGY does not seek to provide faith formation or instruct children in their beliefs (NCCA 2014b). However, there is evidence in the findings that the instruction of Roman Catholic children *into* their religion is occurring in the schools. CNS literature is clear that teachers are required to act as facilitators of the children’s exploration of their beliefs through conversation, story and song (Erricker and Erricker 2000; NCCA 2014b). However, it is clear that a genuine struggle exists among the teachers when facing the challenges of religious diversity in their classrooms (Ipgrave 2009; Bryan 2012). There is an assumption that teachers are knowledgeable about the different beliefs of the

children in their classes and comfortable with difficult questions or conversations that may arise. This research highlights that many teachers do not feel confident in the role of facilitator of belief nurture. Many feel vulnerable and fearful of saying the wrong thing (Revell 2009; Ipgrave 2009).

In reality, the identity of the vast majority of Irish primary teachers are from the majority culture (Hegarty and Titley 2013). Research conducted by Keane and Heinz (2015) reveal that 99% of entrants into primary initial teacher education colleges define themselves as ‘White Irish’. Considering that their initial teacher education prepares them comprehensively for how to faith-form in a denominational context (Coolahan et al 2012), it is no surprise that some teachers in Community National schools will default to this role with Catholic children in the belief-specific lessons. On the other hand, the teachers asked to facilitate the belief specific lessons for Muslims and other belief groups understandably feel ill-equipped due to their lack of training and knowledge.

5.6.1 Finding 1: The Need for Adequate ITE and CPD

A genuine commitment and integrity on the part of teachers and principals to grapple with the issues arising from plurality and equality in Community National schools was evident in this research. However, a lack of confidence among teachers was a key finding. All teachers stated that they were inadequately prepared in college for managing the challenges of religious diversity. They reported a lack of adequate knowledge about different beliefs and cultures and a fear of offending minority beliefs. This echoes literature in this area which states that teachers need to be prepared with the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to manage religious diversity in school settings (McLaughlin 2003; OSCE 2007; Irwin 2013; Byrne 2013; Nieto 2013; Jackson 2014). The lack of cultural and religious diversity that presently exists among the student body in the colleges of education in fact leaves colleges at a disadvantage (Hegarty and Titley 2013).

There is a different approach needed to teach in a multi-belief context than that needed to teach in a denominational setting. While initial teacher education in Ireland aspires to prepare students to teach religious education in a variety of school settings, a number of the interviewees stated that during their time in college a priority was given to teaching religious education in denominational settings (Coolahan et al. 2012).

An interesting insight was offered by some of the interviewees who believed that too much can be expected of teacher education colleges. They argued that it is only through experience in multi-belief schools and the support and understanding of leadership that the real learning occurs (Jackson 2014). This may be true regarding the refinement of skills and methodologies in plural settings but teachers still require a good foundation in the study of world religions and secular beliefs before entering the teaching profession (Byrne 2013). Initial teacher education needs to focus on the development of dispositions and facilitation skills for diverse classroom settings which will empower teachers to feel some degree of confidence when facing the reality of diversity (Jackson 2014).

Finally, continuing professional development emerged as a real need in the research findings. The need for reflective practice among teachers and principals was mentioned by some of the interviewees (OSCE 2007; Scaife 2010; Jackson 2014). They spoke of the need for teachers and principals to reflect on their own assumptions and biases and how these might impact on their classroom or leadership practice (OSCE 2007; Nash and Baskette 2008; Everington, Avest, Bakker and Van der Want 2011; MacDonald 2012; Jackson 2014). Teachers also expressed their need for further training in the facilitation of inter-belief conversation and on how to manage difficult conversations in the classroom regarding religious extremism.

5.7 Concluding Thoughts

Diversity is complex. It is clear from the findings of this research that Community National schools are making laudable efforts to cater for pluralism in an education system that is unique and complex. This is partly due to the monolithic educational system inherited. It could also be argued that most parents seem happy with the status quo that schools continue to engage with the belief nurture of their child. However, it is evident that some parents from minority groups, such as Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses and Atheists would prefer that their children do not engage in inter-belief dialogue or learn *from* religions. A small percentage of parents and interviewees in this research seemed to feel that these state-managed schools should be non-denominational; secular common schools.

The term 'belief nurture' arose as problematic in this research. There is a blurring of lines between the roles and responsibilities of the different stakeholders in Community

National schools regarding the religious education and instruction of children. This has led to a lack of consistency in putting policy into practice. There are also differing views among principals and teachers regarding the role and ethos of the schools in nurturing and celebrating all beliefs in the schools.

It is important to point out that Community National schools are still a relatively new model of provision in a rapidly changing plural landscape in Ireland. It is clear, however, that the influence of the Roman Catholic Church during the inception of these schools has led to further complexity and confusion among the stakeholders. It must be acknowledged that the Church was invited by the then Minister for Education to initially take on the patronage of the schools when they were emergency schools and were responding to a lack of school places. However, the ‘non-negotiable requirement’ (O’Kelly 2012) that faith formation be provided for Roman Catholic pupils during the school day, as the schools evolved, has proved untenable.

The crux of the struggle within Community National schools seems to be the question posed by one of the teachers in the research and used in the title of this research – ‘We are inclusive, but are we being equal? (T3). The schools are unquestionably *inclusive* in terms of their enrolment policy and the equal access given to all applicants (Murphy, 2013). The desire to nurture the development of the ‘whole’ child, including their beliefs (NCCA 2014) could also be argued as inclusive. The term *equality* refers to the promotion of fairness and justice. However, equality can only work if everyone’s needs are the same (Clow et al. 2009).

At the launch of the schools in 2007, Mary Hanafin, then Minister for Education, stated that the schools would accommodate the diverse preferences of parents for varying forms of religious education and faith formation during the school day (Hanafin 2007). The statement by the former Minister recognises that parents and children have differing expectations and needs when it comes to religious education. This founding intention of the schools is more in line with the term *equity*. Equity, seeks to try to understand and provide people with what they need rather than the same thing as everyone else (Clow et al. 2009). It was strongly asserted in the data for this research that equality of provision for all children was impossible in terms of religious education or belief nurturing. In terms of equity, it was

also stated in the data that despite the school's best efforts, they could not 'be all things to all people' (P7). The Roman Catholic majority, however, do in practice receive more accommodation in terms of religious education and faith formation than the other beliefs in the schools.

Therefore, are Community National schools being equal? In terms of religious education, this research would argue that they are not. They are undoubtedly inclusive but it is also evident that the schools are unable to be equitable due to the limited resources available to them.

In the next and final chapter, a series of recommendations is presented and suggestions for further research are outlined.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We do not need common values in order to live together in peace.
We need common institutions in which many forms of life can
coexist (Gray 2000, p. 8).

6.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter will address the research questions which were posed at the outset of the study. It will go on to make a number of recommendations for reflection for the stakeholders in Community National schools. Proposals for further research will also be made.

6.2 A Response to the Research Questions

The overall aim of this research was to give voice to the challenges being experienced by principals, co-ordinating teachers of GMGY and parents in Community National schools due to the reality of religious diversity. Five key research questions which informed the research aim were presented in Chapter One and these have been addressed by the research process.

The first question asked whether Community National School's inclusive policy meets the needs of the various communities of faith and worldviews in Ireland today. It is clear from this research that they do not. A bias towards the faith formation needs of Roman Catholic children emerged in the findings. The practice of faith formation during belief specific teaching for Roman Catholic children and preparation for sacraments during the school day in some Community National schools are posing considerable challenges to principals and teachers in the schools. They have also been recognised by the Irish bishops as inadequate. The research concludes that the practice of belief specific teaching in the schools creates an inequality in terms of providing for the different beliefs in the schools.

The second research question asked if it is possible to cater for all faiths and worldviews in a common religious education programme. This research provides evidence that a common religious education programme cannot cater for all beliefs if there is a requirement for faith formation within the programme. While the rationale for belief specific teaching is to respect difference and nurture children in their own belief identity it was clear

from the findings of this study that there is a lack of equity in the approach taken. Placing Roman Catholics in one group, all ‘other’ Christian denominations in another group, all Muslims together and creating a group for Humanists, Buddhists and Hindus and whoever else is not catered for does not create equal educational experiences for the children nor does it recognise the plurality that exists within beliefs.

The third question in this research wondered what type of religious education programme and pedagogy would be appropriate in a state school system that seeks to support and cater for the belief nurture of all pupils during the school day. The GMGY junior programme does not fit into any one model of religious education. It adopts a hybrid approach to religious education through the use of narrative, conversation and quiet time. It seeks to incorporate learning *from* religion through inter-belief conversation and learning *into* religion in the belief specific element. Learning *about* religion is unstructured as it depends on what children share about their different beliefs in the classroom.

The junior GMGY programme is currently under review by the NCCA and will most likely be aligned with the approach taken in the senior GMGY programme. This approach offers a multi-belief approach and explores themes common to all beliefs, such as celebration or pilgrimage. These experiences can be secular or religious in nature. The role of parents remains central to this process. The children conduct family projects that explore the concept with their parents from the belief perspective of their family and belief community (NCCA 2016a). This approach retains the junior programme’s aim to use human experience as a vehicle for dialogue and belief nurture. It also continues to hold a narrative approach as central to the process. However, the efforts to learn *about* and *from* religion are more explicit and structured through the family projects. Of particular note is the fact that the children are not divided for belief specific lessons in the senior GMGY programme. The individual beliefs of the children are nurtured through the exploration of the common themes within the class and with their families through the family projects (NCCA 2016a).

European policy documents on religious education support this approach as they state that RE in public schools should incorporate learning *about* as well as *from* religions (Council of Europe 2008; Jackson 2014).

The fourth research question was interested in other challenges facing the schools regarding religious and secular iconography, sacramental preparation for Roman Catholic children and the celebration of times of significance and religious festivals. This research reveals that there are contrasting views among principals on the display of images and iconography in the schools. An uncertainty also exists among the principals and teachers as to whether the display of religious symbols is for educational purposes or as a means of recognition and respect for the diversity of beliefs in the school.

The approach taken to Sacramental preparation differs in each school and seems to depend on the relationship and resources available in the local parish. The schools which were persuaded by their parishes to provide sacramental preparation during the school day reported that this was logistically difficult. The celebration of festivals also seems to require further deliberation and consensus among the schools. A lack of adequate recognition of the festivals belonging to the majority culture, namely Christmas and Halloween, was highlighted as an issue for some parents.

Finally, the views of parents regarding the ethos and guiding principles of the religious education programme and the challenges they experience due to their faith or belief were sought. The questionnaire for parents in this research revealed interesting findings. The vast majority of the parents were supportive of the ethos of Community National schools and the guiding principles for the GMGY programme. Almost half of the parental respondents also stated that they engage with the GMGY programme at home with their child. These findings were of interest because the majority of the teachers and principals interviewed believed that parents were not engaging with the GMGY programme at home or taking responsibility for the faith formation of their child. Challenges that emerged for some parents were around the perceived dilution of the celebration of some festivals and a tension between their private values and the ethos of the school.

6.3 Recommendations

The findings of this research suggest the following recommendations for consideration by the Irish Government, patrons of Community National schools, the NCCA, Colleges of Initial Teacher Education and the Roman Catholic Bishops:

1. If the Irish government wishes children to learn *into* their beliefs and to offer faith formation during the school day in their state-run schools, as was stated by the Minister for Education during their inception, they will need to provide the necessary resources for Community National schools to achieve this. Although a limitation of this research is that it did not explore comparative approaches to RE in other countries, the approach taken in state schools in Finland is worth considering. In these schools ‘Religion or Ethics’ is one of the compulsory core subjects. Faith formation is arranged in accordance with the religion of the majority of the pupils. Pupils of other beliefs are entitled to instruction in their own religion if their parents/guardians so wish, and if there are three or more pupils of the same religion to form a group. If instruction in a pupil’s own religion is not available, the pupil must be provided with some other form of instruction or supervised activity (Coolahan et al 2012). This approach in Finland seems to correlate with the original vision described for Community National schools in 2008 and shows that such a model is possible if the financial resources are provided.
2. A recommendation for those reviewing the junior GMGY programme in the NCCA is that clarity and consensus is needed around terminology such as ‘belief nurture’ and ‘inter-belief dialogue’ and ‘inter-belief conversation’. Confusion was expressed in this research by the majority of the principals and teachers regarding the meaning of the term ‘belief nurture’ and many were unsure how to facilitate it in the classroom. A lack of confidence was also expressed by some teachers around facilitating inter-belief dialogue in their classrooms. Therefore continuing professional development on how to facilitate belief nurture and inter-belief conversations is required. CPD support and resources for teachers and principals are needed from their patron.

A CPD certificate programme was designed by ETBI and Marino Institute of Education in 2017 to address the themes of cultural diversity, English as an additional language, religious diversity and human rights in the context of Community National schools. This has been received well by teachers and principals. Another matter that was specifically requested in this study was the need for CPD for teachers on how to respond to global incidents related to religious extremism with children.

In addition to this there is an evident need emerging from this research for reflective practice groups to be organised in the schools. The groups would be for teachers or for principals and would focus on the daily encounters they experience in religiously diverse contexts. The facilitator of these reflective practice groups would create space for reflection and encouragement to consider one's own assumptions and identity needs. This should be a pre-requisite to teaching in a Community National schools.

3. This leads to the next recommendation for effective ITE in the various colleges of education. Knowledge about different religions and beliefs and the skills needed to manage religiously diverse classrooms is essential in initial teacher education. Teachers require facilitation and moderation skills. They also require the skills to foster the dispositions in the children for respectful listening, empathy and personal expression (NCCA 2016a). While colleges of education are responding to the need to prepare students adequately for teaching in religiously diverse settings, there is still need for greater development in this area. Students should be offered more than optional electives in teaching in diverse school contexts. These modules need to be integrated into the mainstream programmes in the colleges. Colleges of education also need to be proactive in recruiting students from minority religious groups to a career in primary education.
4. Another recommendation for ETBI patrons and also in particular for the Catholic Bishops is the establishment of clear delineations between the roles and responsibilities of parents, the school and the belief communities associated with their schools. Whilst they are inter-dependent and rely on one another, they have different purposes. The present blurring of these responsibilities could be argued as one of the main challenges to Community National schools regarding religious diversity.

There is also a need for regulation around sacramental preparation in Community National schools. While the conclusion to this research project was being written up, the Catholic Bishops have indicated that the sacramental preparation and belief

specific lessons provided in Community National schools are not adequate for the faith formation of Roman Catholic children (Leahy 2017). Four weeks prior to the submission of this thesis it was announced by Minister Richard Bruton that the ETBI intends changing their policy regarding sacramental preparation during the school day and belief specific teaching (Donnelly 2017; O'Brien 2017). He indicated that belief nurture will remain as an aim within the GMGY programme but children will no longer be divided for belief specific teaching in the junior programme. The schools will continue to support families in the practice and celebration of their beliefs, including sacramental preparation, but this will be done outside of school time, facilitated on the school grounds. This policy change seeks to offer more equality in the opportunities offered to the various beliefs in their schools (Donnelly 2017; O'Brien 2017).

This poses a challenge and opportunity for Roman Catholic parishes to now consider how the parish can become the focal point for the faith development of children and indeed of adults. As stated in *Share the Good News*, primary schools can offer support to the parishes and parents, not the other way round (Irish Episcopal Conference 2010).

5. Finally, more engagement is needed between the patron and the schools regarding how the Community National school ethos acknowledges and celebrates festivals and whether the schools should display religious and secular iconography from the various beliefs in their schools. Engagement with parents at a local level around what they would like to be marked in the school and how this can be done at classroom level may be one way of approaching this challenge.

6.4 Suggestions for Further Research

There is a clear lack of empirical research on the provision of religious education in Irish schools and the implications for minority students. Smyth and Darmody (2011) state that while research on the integration of students of ethnic minorities in Ireland is growing,

religious diversity has been given less attention in terms of policy and research than linguistic or cultural diversity.

The questionnaire for parents used in this research process opened up some interesting questions for further inquiry. The research would have benefitted from a greater sample of responses from parents, particularly parents from ethnic minority groups. Further research into the experiences of parents, particularly parents with minority beliefs, regarding their beliefs and values and how they reconcile these with the ethos of Community National schools would be worthwhile. The views and experiences of parents with no belief or atheistic beliefs would be particularly interesting.

A tension emerged in this research between the views of the teachers and principals around the lack of engagement of parents with the GMGY programme and the relatively high proportion of parents (49%) that stated that they do engage with the programme at home. A deeper study into how parents are engaging with GMGY and their experiences of the programme would be worthwhile.

This research did not look at children's voices for reasons indicated in Chapter Three. While Faas et al (2017a and b) have included the voices of fifth and sixth class children in their research on Community National schools, a deeper study into the experiences of children from a variety of cultural and religious backgrounds in religiously diverse classrooms and how they respond to the GMGY programme would be beneficial.

Research into teacher competence in managing religious diversity in the classroom and the impact of their personal identity would be beneficial. This may create an impetus around the importance of reflective practice for teachers and the need for a safe space for teachers to unpack their own biases and beliefs.

6.5 A Final Note: Many Beliefs, One Community

It is apparent that an understanding of the complexities that need to be addressed by policy-makers regarding religious education and ethos need to be debated further by legislators as well as by the Education and Training Boards. The Council of Europe (2007) states that political and legal bodies have to adopt a progressive attitude towards religion which is itself evolving and must be scrupulous in safeguarding its citizen's freedom of conscience and

religion, and ensuring that it does not put any particular religious group at an advantage or disadvantage.

This study explored some of the current challenges facing Community National schools regarding religious diversity. It has provided new knowledge about the approach being taken in the schools to diversity of belief and about possible directions that could influence policy decisions into the future. It argues that Community National schools should have the opportunity to own the public schooling space within the state and provide for the needs of all pupils, regardless of their faith or belief. This will not diminish the challenges of catering for religious diversity in the daily life of the schools. The concept of the publically-managed school in Ireland requires further reflection and possibly even transformation.

As stated earlier in this chapter, ETBI are currently making changes to their policy regarding sacramental preparation in their schools and the provision of belief specific teaching which will most likely come into effect in September 2018. This recent change in policy, indicated by the Minister for Education, confirms the findings of this research. Watson (2013) argues that publically-funded schools must ensure they provide a forum for open and respectful sharing and debate rather than seeking consensus. Community National schools need to continue to foster the environment they have begun to create for children and their families to nurture their identity and beliefs. These schools are a common space that enable many beliefs and practices to coexist and be valued together. It is my hope that although the ETBI intends to change their policy regarding belief specific teaching and sacramental preparation, their distinctive aim of belief nurture and inter-belief conversation will not be lost. The schools need courageous approaches to nurturing inter-belief conversation and the empowerment of parents to engage in the process with them.

...the essential tasks of the school in radical education are to expose children (and parents) to diversity and otherness, to enable them to think for themselves, and to equip them to live in a democracy of plural values, multiple identities and diverse ways of life...The aim is to reconcile individuals and ways of life, honouring conflicting values to a life in common. We do not need common values in order to live together in peace. We need common institutions in which many forms of life can coexist.

(Fielding and Moss 2011, p. 133)

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

APPROVAL FOR RESEARCH BY THE DCU RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University



Ms Aiveen Mullally
School of Education Studies

REC Reference: DCUREC/2015/228

Proposal Title: The Challenges to Community National schools Regarding Religious Diversity

Applicant(s): Ms Aiveen Mullally, Dr Gareth Byrne

Dear Aiveen,

This research proposal qualifies under our Notification Procedure, as a low risk social research project. Therefore, the DCU Research Ethics Committee approves this project.

Materials used to recruit participants should state that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further amendment submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Dónal O'Mathúna

Chairperson DCU Research Ethics Committee

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Dónal O'Mathúna'.



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APPENDIX B

Plain Language Statement

You have been chosen to participate in this research about the challenges Community National schools may be experiencing due to religious diversity in their schools. The research for this study will form the basis of a doctoral thesis in Education which will be submitted to DCU. Very little research has been conducted on Community National schools to date because they are a new model of primary school in Ireland. The study will hopefully provide insights into the types of supports and policies necessary to nurture multi-denominational schools.

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you consent to participate in an interview, you will be invited to meet with the researcher for no more than one hour for a face-to-face interview during the school day at a time convenient to you. The interviews will be audio recorded using a mp3 recorder and later transcribed by a research assistant. A copy of the transcribed interview will be sent to you for review afterwards.

If you wish to participate in the anonymous questionnaire for parents, it will take no more than 15 minutes during this school meeting.

All data collected will be treated confidentially, within the usual legal limitations for such. The questionnaires will be anonymous. Pseudonyms for the principals, teachers and schools will be used and information supplied or views expressed during the research will only be communicated to the researcher and research assistant (i.e. the person transcribing the interviews) and will not be attributed to individuals.

No information will be given in writing up the research to potentially identify the schools involved or individuals involved. This research will not attempt to evaluate in any way the work of any individual or particular school.

Audio recordings of the interviews will be stored on computer and will be password protected. It will be saved for five years, after which time the data will be destroyed.

A box with the completed questionnaires and interview transcripts will be kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office for five years, after which time the data will be destroyed.

Participants may request to view the results and findings of the study by requesting this directly from the researcher. Upon completion, the researcher will also share the findings with the relevant stakeholders and patrons of the Community National School model.

The benefit of taking part in this research is your opportunity to assist the development of Community National schools by outlining some of the challenges faced by these schools as

they evolve. Your feedback will potentially influence the on-going development of the policy and practice of these school types.

No risks are foreseen due to participation in this study. The sensitivities of participants with regard to their opinions and religious beliefs will be respected.

Participation in this study is voluntary and participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any point. This can be done by emailing the researcher: aiveen.mullally@mie.ie

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:

The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000

APPENDIX C

DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

CONSENT FORM FOR INTERVIEWS

The Challenges to Community National schools Regarding Religious Diversity

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Edd Student in the School of Education, DCU

Research Supervisor: Dr Gareth Byrne

The purpose of this research is to explore the challenges regarding religious diversity in the emerging primary model of Community National schools in Ireland. Respect for different faiths and beliefs is integral to the daily routine of the schools. To date these schools are catering for a significant number of minority ethnic communities in Ireland.

In order to assist with the development of policy and practice in these schools and to document the challenges faced as they emerge and develop, it is timely to conduct in-depth research into the successes and challenges facing this school model, particularly regarding how the needs of different belief groups are catered for and celebrated.

Please Complete the Following (circle Yes or No for each question):

- | | |
|---|----------|
| • I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me) | Yes / No |
| • I understand the information provided | Yes / No |
| • I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study | Yes / No |
| • I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions | Yes / No |
| • I understand that I will be interviewed about my experiences and views on how our school caters for different religious and belief groups | Yes / No |
| • I am aware that my interview will be audiotaped | Yes / No |
| • I understand that I will be sent a copy of the interview transcript to review | Yes / No |
| • I am aware that I may request to view the final study upon completion | Yes / No |
| • I understand that all information provided in this interview will be confidential | |

and anonymous. Pseudonyms will be used when writing up the research findings. Yes / No

- I understand that no information will be given in the writing of the research that could potentially identify the schools or individuals involved. Yes / No
- I understand that all information supplied as part of participation is subject to the established legal limitation and confidentiality. Yes / No
- I understand that participation in this research is voluntary and that I may withdraw from it at any point by emailing aiveen.mullally@mie.ie Yes / No

Signature:

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researchers, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project.

Participants Signature:

Name in Block Capitals:

Witness:

Date:

APPENDIX D

Interview Schedule for School Principals

Let me first start by thanking you for agreeing to partake in this interview. Your contribution is very valuable to this doctoral research.

Our interview should last approximately 1 hour and during that time we will be talking about your experiences and views on how your school is catering for religious diversity.

1. How does your school provide for pupils of various religions and belief systems?
2. How does your school engage in rituals and mark religious festivals?
3. What other world-views or national holidays does your school celebrate or acknowledge? (EG: Chinese New Year, Halloween, International Humanist Day, Winter or Summer Solstice, St Patrick's Day)
4. What is your opinion of the multi-belief programme GMGY? What are its strengths and challenges?
5. How is the withdrawal of students from religion classes or religious / national festivals managed? (if applicable)
6. Are there other particular curricular needs that have emerged, due to religious or secular beliefs? (E.G. / PE / Music)
7. What about religious symbols or imagery in your school – have they presented any challenges to date?
8. What do you think CNS schools should be aiming towards regarding religious symbols, imagery and crests?
9. How is Sacramental Preparation offered in your school?
10. Do other faith groups seek similar support for rites of initiation?
11. Has your school encountered any specific dietary needs due to religious belief? How has the school responded?
12. Have there been any issues regarding religious dress?
13. Are there any other challenges that have arisen in your school regarding religious diversity?
14. Do you think teachers are effectively trained for responding effectively to the needs of the religiously diverse population of the school?
15. Would you identify any particular area that you think policy and decision-making for the accommodation and inclusion of religious difference needs to be development by the CNS patron?

APPENDIX E

Interview Schedule with GMGY Coordinators

Let me first start by thanking you for agreeing to partake in this interview. Your contribution is very valuable to this doctoral research.

Our interview should last approximately 1 hour and during that time we will be talking about your experiences and views on how your school is catering for religious diversity.

1. How does your school provide for pupils of various religions and belief systems?
2. How does your school engage in rituals and mark religious festivals?
3. What other world-views or national holidays does your school celebrate or acknowledge? (EG: Chinese New Year, Halloween, International Humanist Day, Winter or Summer Solstice, St Patrick's Day)
4. What is your opinion of the multi-belief programme GMGY? What are its strengths and challenges?
5. How is the withdrawal of students from religion classes or religious / national festivals managed? (if applicable)
6. Are there other particular curricular needs that have emerged, due to religious or secular beliefs? (E.G. / PE / Music)
7. What about religious symbols or imagery in your school – have they presented any challenges to date?
8. What do you think CNS schools should be aiming towards regarding religious symbols, imagery and crests?
9. How is Sacramental Preparation offered in your school?
10. Do other faith groups seek similar support for rites of initiation?
11. Has your school encountered any specific dietary needs due to religious belief? How has the school responded?
12. Have there been any issues regarding religious dress?
13. Are there any other challenges that have arisen in your school regarding religious diversity?
14. Do you think teachers are effectively trained for responding effectively to the needs of the religiously diverse population of the school?
15. Would you identify any particular area that you think policy and decision-making for the accommodation and inclusion of religious difference needs to be developed by the CNS patron?

APPENDIX F

Questionnaire for Parents



Questionnaire for Parents Challenges to Community National Schools Regarding Religious Diversity

Introduction to Research

This is a questionnaire about your experiences as a parent regarding any challenges you may experience in your local Community National School due to your religious faith or belief.

In order to assist with the development of policy and practice in Community National Schools and to document the challenges faced as they emerge and develop, this research is exploring the successes and challenges these schools experience, particularly regarding how the needs of different belief groups are catered for and celebrated.

This questionnaire is part of my research for a Doctoral Programme in Education that I am carrying out in Dublin City University (DCU). Your participation is very much appreciated.

The structure of the questionnaire is as follows:

Section A: Background Information

Section B: Belief Statements about Inclusive Practices

Section C: Challenges due to Beliefs or Religious Commitments

The questionnaire should take you approximately 5 - 10 minutes to complete.



Questionnaire for Parents Challenges to Community National Schools Regarding Religious Diversity

Section A: Background Information

1. What religion or belief system are you affiliated to?

- ☐ Atheist
- ☐ Buddhist
- ☐ Christian
- ☐ Hindu
- ☐ Humanist
- ☐ Jehovah's Witness
- ☐ Jewish
- ☐ Muslim
- ☐ No Belief System
- ☐ Orthodox Catholic
- ☐ Roman Catholic
- ☐ Other (please specify)

* 2. Was the Community National School's inclusive ethos, catering for all faiths and beliefs, important to you when choosing to send your child here?

* 3. How aware are you of the 'Goodness Me, Goodness You!' (GMGY) programme that seeks to nurture your child in his/her own belief? Tick one answer:

- ☐ Very aware, we engage with the GMGY material at home
- ☐ Vaguely aware, but we do not discuss GMGY at home
- ☐ Unaware
- ☐ Uninterested

Section B: Beliefs About Inclusive Practices

Read each statement below and decide how you feel about each one. Please select one option to describe your reaction to each statement.

4. I am happy that my child is exposed to different religious and non-religious belief systems in school.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

5. Community National Schools should seek to nurture the development of the whole child, including their beliefs or religion.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

6. I am happy for my child to participate in celebrations of different religious festivals in school (e.g. Christmas, Diwali, Eid).

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

7. I am happy for my child to participate in celebrations of different secular festivals in school (e.g. Halloween).

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

8. I am responsible for handing on the values, beliefs and traditions of my family and community to my child.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Section C: Challenges Due to Beliefs or Religious Commitments

9. Does your child have any dietary needs due to religious beliefs?

Yes

No

☐☐

If yes, can you describe the dietary requirements and how your school caters for them:

10. Please describe any other challenges you may encounter with your child's schooling due to your religious beliefs and commitments:

11. How has the school supported your family and community in celebrating important religious festivals or events (e.g. First Communion / Eid / Diwali).

APPENDIX G

Email sent to parents with link to questionnaire

Dear Parent/ Guardian,

My name is Aiveen Mullally. I am a student in DCU carrying out doctoral research on ***'The Challenges to Community National schools Regarding Religious Diversity'***.

I am very interested in your views on the ethos of Community National schools and whether you experience any challenges due to your beliefs in the school.

I would appreciate 5 minutes of your time to complete this questionnaire.

It is completely anonymous.

Please click this link to bring you to the questionnaire:

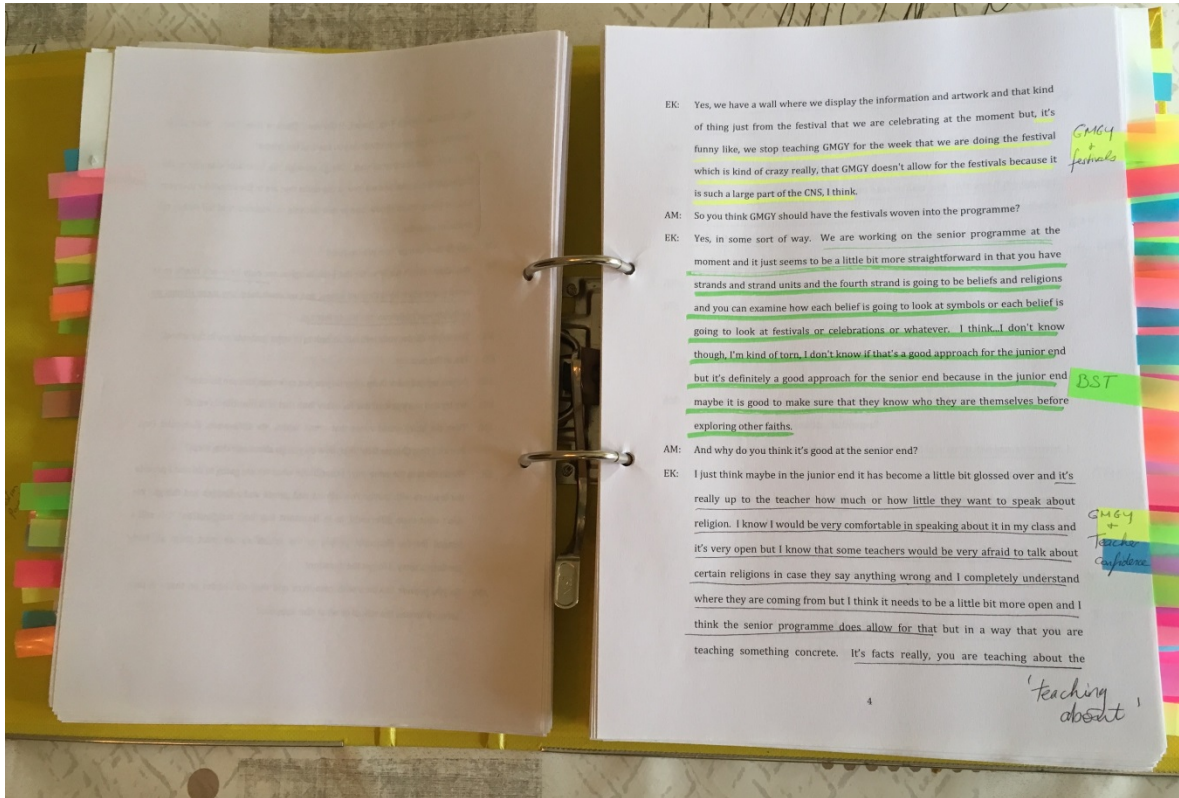
<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/DGZFC2V>

Thank you for your participation!

Aiveen Mullally

APPENDIX H

Image of the Coding Process



APPENDIX I

Establishment of Major and Minor Themes for Data Analysis

Major Themes	Sub-Themes	Minor Themes	Miscellaneous Themes
GMGY	BST Belief Nurture Inter-belief dialogue Objections from Muslim Parents Teacher Vulnerability Pluralism within Beliefs Inequality of Provision Christo-centric bias Role of Parents Logistics	BST Parents and GMGY Guiding Principles	Diet
Sacramental Preparation	Relationship with Parish Inequality of Provision Regulation CNS Identity Response of Parents		Curricular Issues
Celebration of Festivals	Different Approaches Secular Approach Christmas Halloween Response of Parents Use of Symbols Effectiveness	Use of Symbols	
Teacher education and CPD	Reflective practice Lack of Initial Teacher education and Knowledge of different beliefs		
Parents	Dialogue Tension between values and ethos Objection of Muslim parents to GMGY	Curricular Issues	Wearing of religious symbols

Adapted from Tesch (1990) Data Analysis Procedure