

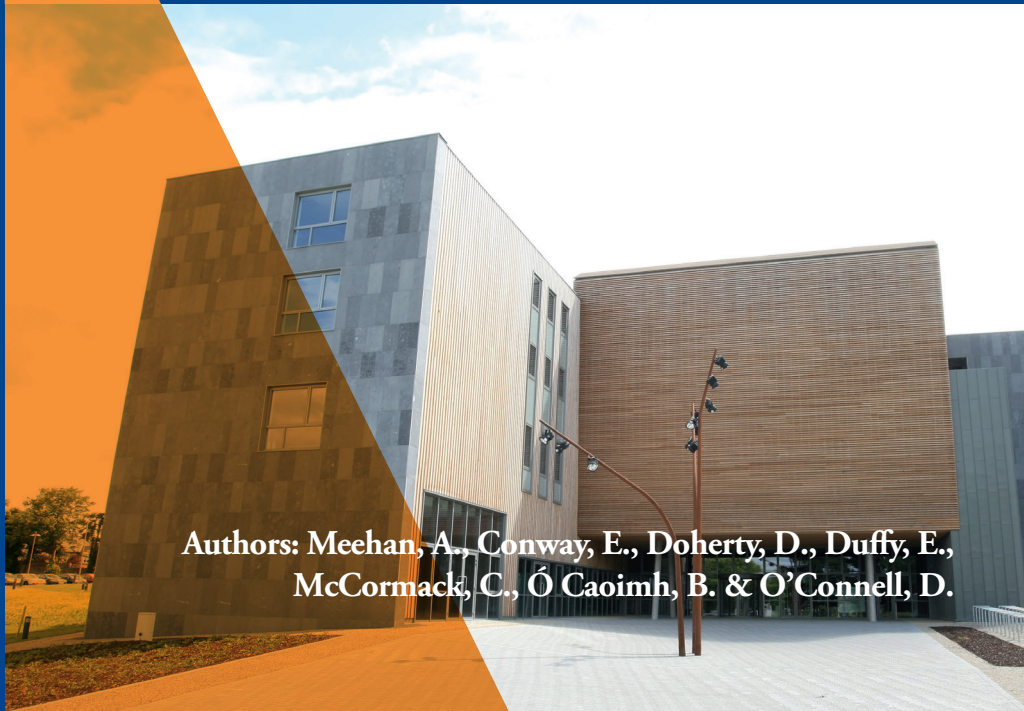


Global Researchers
Advancing Catholic Education



REPORT 5

**Religious Education as an Expression of
Identity and Ethos in Catholic Schools
in Ireland**



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Religious Education as an Expression of Identity and Ethos in Catholic Schools in Ireland

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About the GRACE (Ireland) Research Project

Global Researchers Advancing Catholic Education (GRACE) is an international research-based partnership between academics in universities and Catholic education bodies across three different continents (Mary Immaculate College, Limerick; Notre Dame University, Fremantle, Australia; Roche Center for Catholic Education, Boston College; St Mary's University, London; University of Glasgow; and the International Office for Catholic Education). GRACE provides an opportunity for scholars and practitioners of Catholic education and theology in their respective countries to affirm, study, collaborate, and respond meaningfully to challenges in Catholic education. Among its aims is to strengthen the argument for the importance of faith-based schools in a plural society.

This GRACE (Ireland)¹ research project – entitled *Identity and Ethos in Catholic Primary and Secondary Schools in Ireland, Exploring the Attitudes and Behaviours of Stakeholders* – aims to establish a clear baseline and a set of signposts for the advancing of Catholic education at primary and secondary levels in the Republic of Ireland. The objectives of the research are:

- to complete a stakeholder mapping that identifies all the relevant actors and assesses their vision and roles – actual and potential – in contributing to the provision of Catholic education at both primary and secondary levels
- to capture and classify the values that underpin stakeholders' approaches
- to establish stakeholders' capacity to progress and further Catholic education.

Four Irish ecclesial documents underpin this research:

- The Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference pastoral letter for Catholic schools *Vision 08* (ICBC 2008)
- *Share the Good News – The National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland* (IEC 2010)
- *Understanding and living the ethos in a Catholic voluntary secondary school: a process centred on conversations* (CSP 2016)
- *Understanding and living the ethos in a Catholic primary school: a process centred on conversations* (CSP 2019).

The Overview to the six reports considers in some detail the underlying vision for Catholic schools that is charted in these documents with reference to how identity and ethos are expected to be amplified in Catholic schools.

Acronyms

BoM Board of Management

CPD Continuing Professional Development

CPPREC Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland

CSP Catholic Schools Partnership

DA Diocesan Advisor

ICBC Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference

IEC Irish Episcopal Conference

JCRE Junior Cycle Religious Education

LCRE Leaving Certificate Religious Education

NCCA National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

RE Religious Education

SCCF Senior Cycle Curriculum Framework

SCRE Senior Cycle Religious Education

SGN Share the Good News

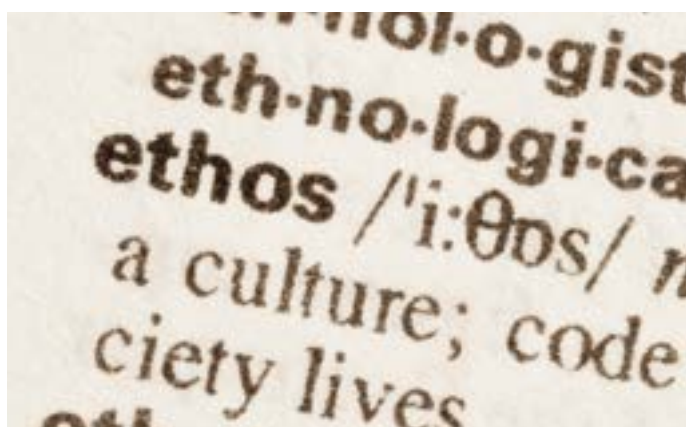
¹ With the support of the Mater Dei Centre for Catholic Education DCU in the analysis of the data and write-up of reports.

Key Findings

- 84 per cent of primary school principals state that they ensure Religious Education (RE) receives its allotted time. However, the reality is disputed by data from other cohorts. For instance, just 17 per cent of teachers say they teach RE every day, and 40 per cent of teachers teach the subject twice a week or less.
- 33 per cent of teachers follow the curriculum and textbooks approved by the Irish Episcopal Conference (IEC) only to some/a limited extent, and 5 per cent not at all. This stands in marked contrast to the 90 per cent of principals who report they always or mostly ensure that the curriculum and textbooks are used.
- Qualitative findings reveal three main reasons why some teachers are not fully meeting RE requirements: lack of personal faith/commitment to RE; time pressures/curriculum overload; and lack of external support and oversight of RE.
- 79 per cent of those who teach RE in Catholic secondary schools hold a degree or equivalent in RE.
- The qualitative data uncover significant concern about Senior Cycle Religious Education (SCRE), with an overall sense pervading the data of SCRE as directionless. Qualitative evidence emerged of a lack of standards, lack of support, and lack of oversight of SCRE. Participants identified focus on the quality and oversight of RE as a priority for patrons and trusts.
- Catholic schools at both levels are clearly sensitive to the presence of pupils of faiths and worldviews other than Christian. For instance, 71 per cent of respondents (primary) agreed that students of a faith other than Christian have the freedom to express their faith.
- Experience of the role of diocesan advisor varies considerably in both primary and secondary schools. For instance, 25 per cent of primary school teachers interviewed had never heard of the diocesan advisor and had no idea of their role.

Religious Education as an Expression of Identity and Ethos in Catholic Schools

This report focuses on Religious Education (RE) as an expression of identity and ethos in Catholic schools. The understanding of RE in this regard is derived from the four Irish ecclesial documents that underpin this research (see Overview). The report is divided into three main sections. Section One presents the conceptual framework for the theme of this report: Religious Education in Catholic schools in the Republic of Ireland. This section includes a brief description of the methodology. Section Two of the report presents the research findings – both quantitative and qualitative – pertaining to Religious Education as an expression of identity and ethos in Catholic schools. The third and final section of the report presents an analysis of the findings and accompanying recommendations.



Section One

Although the approach may vary, most European countries accept the necessity of school-based Religious Education (Schreiner 2013) and provide Religious Education (RE hereafter) in publicly funded schools (NCCA 2017, p.25). In Scotland, England and Wales, for instance, a legal provision exists for RE as a core (compulsory) subject for all pupils (McKinney and McCluskey 2017; Stuart-Buttle 2017).

Over the last two decades, the Council of Europe has increasingly looked to RE as a means of promoting intercultural understanding and respect for diverse beliefs. More recently, the Council's recommendations go beyond just teaching about religion; they promote the development of attitudes such as sensitivity and respect for religious and non-religious traditions, as well as competences such as religious literacy and understanding. Such competences, the Council holds, are necessary for intercultural living, and RE has an important contribution to make in this regard. At the same time, the research indicates that across Europe young people regard highly the place of RE in school as a safe space to learn and talk about their own and others' religions, beliefs and truth claims (NCCA 2017, pp.28-31).

In Catholic philosophy, education means the development of the whole person. Religious Education is a vital element of this holistic development; internationally, it is an essential part of the curriculum in Catholic schools. The Irish Catholic bishops uphold RE as an expression of school ethos and recognise the importance of RE in holistic education. This depends on 'a realistic understanding of the needs of contemporary young people, on an appreciation of the opportunities and challenges they face ... and the continuing willingness of the Catholic faith community to put its best resources at the disposal of the young' (ICBC 2017, p.5). Furthermore, they recognise the need for an RE that opens students to different religious perspectives:

The Catholic school offers its young people a community that is Catholic and therefore by definition should be reflective, critically disposed, service-of-other-orientated, and happy to support its students in ecumenical, interreligious, and intercultural dialogue. Everyone is asked to bring their beliefs and values, their very selves, into the religious education classroom and to open their mind and heart to the deepest meaning of life.

(Byrne 2021, pp.8–9)



The same four key documents that inform the entire GRACE research project (see above and Overview) inform the understanding of RE in this paper.

Vision 08 (ICBC 2008) sees RE as part of an authentically holistic education. By educating students in their every dimension, Catholic schools seek to transform not only the individual human lives of pupils but also the wider society which they will help to build (ICBC 2008). By integrating their understanding of faith with their experience of the world as studied in other subjects, pupils are helped to appropriate what they believe, begin to formulate their own responses to some of life's great questions, and look outside themselves to the world in which they live. The pedagogy of RE in Catholic schools involves helping pupils to grow in self-understanding, to express the search for meaning, and to develop their relationship with God, however (and if) they conceive God to be. In short, RE forms an essential part of the curriculum in Catholic schools and functions at its core. This means, for example, 'that Catholic schools commit resources and time to religious education as a matter of priority' (ICBC 2008, p.4).

Share the Good News (SGN) understands RE as 'formative in nature, allowing students to become aware of and respond to the transcendent dimension of their lives', contributing to their spiritual and moral development (IEC 2010, p.58). Although it can contribute towards faith development, RE is distinct from catechesis (education into the Christian faith and community) (p.52). Mindful of the increasingly pluralist context that we inhabit today, RE should 'be carried out in a way that supports the faith life of the Catholic student, strengthening the harmony between what is known, who one is becoming, and how one lives one's life' (p.57). It sees a purely phenomenological approach of comparing one religion with another, without regard for the faith life of students, their families and faith communities, as inadequate. Rather, it encourages all students to engage with religious questions from within their own context, including that of their own lived religious faith where applicable (pp.57–58).

SGN is clear that principals, at the behest of the Board of Management (BoM), have responsibility for providing suitable occasions for reflection on the spiritual and religious wellbeing of the school community (pp.207–208). (The role and responsibility of the principal in this regard is dealt with in Report 4 in this series.)

Understanding and living the ethos in a Catholic voluntary secondary school: a process centred on conversations (CSP 2016) identifies RE as a resource both for supporting ethos and for personal development. It advises Catholic schools to integrate RE in the curriculum and to properly allocate resources in order to make adequate provision for RE. Like **SGN**, it is wary of the phenomenological approach that empties religious traditions of any significance. It states that since 'religion deals with matters of fundamental, ultimate concern it follows that the religious response has a priority in all one's subsequent reasoning and deliberation' (CSP 2014 p.25). For believers, religious faith is a reality that frames and interprets all of life. Therefore, Catholic schools are called to support Catholic parents who wish to have their children educated in accord with their religious beliefs and socialised in faith, by providing opportunities for 'formation in faith in the living God revealed in the person of Christ' (p.25). A properly resourced RE department (and chaplaincy service) will help the Catholic school to foster a living partnership between home, school and parish (CSP 2016).

Understanding and living the ethos in a Catholic primary school: a process centred on conversations (CSP 2019, pp.17–21) highlights RE as one of five key expressions of ethos and an integral part of the life of the school. The RE programme includes faith formation, prayer and sacramental experiences, and a growing awareness of being stewards of God’s creation. Like Vision 08, it sees RE not just as a school subject but embracing the whole journey of life, requiring support for staff, principals, pupils, parents and members of BoMs ‘in opening their hearts and minds to the presence of God’ (p.19).

Some indicators include:

- The RE programme receives its allotted time for each year and the school follows the curriculum and textbooks approved by the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference.
- The principal or the RE representative work with class groupings in planning the work for the year and this is clearly stated and communicated to parents, staff and the local parish as a basis for mutual understanding and a partnership approach.
- There is a policy statement in the school on RE which includes faith formation, prayer, sacramental experiences, and awareness of the stewardship of God’s creation.
- In partnership with the parish and other bodies, opportunities are provided to staff and board members for adult spiritual support and growth.

In short, these four documents propose RE as:

- essential to holistic education and human development
- integral to the curriculum in Catholic schools
- properly resourced, specifically with regard to time and approved programmes
- adopting a pedagogy that helps pupils to grow in self-understanding, to express the search for meaning and to develop their relationship with God, however (and if) they conceive God to be.

Methodology

This mixed-methods study employed an explanatory sequential design whereby a large body of quantitative data was initially gathered by means of an online survey. This process was followed by a smaller qualitative strand of semi-structured interviews designed to explain and elaborate on the quantitative results (Creswell 2022; Shorten and Smith 2017). This design allows the quantitative data to inform the questions to be explored during the qualitative strand; integration is further enhanced when qualitative analysis uncovers how the qualitative findings help explain the quantitative results in more depth (Creswell 2022).

Survey questionnaires were distributed to four cohorts of secondary and primary school stakeholders. At primary school level, these included members of BoMs, principals (including deputy principals), teachers, and other school staff (including ancillary, support, and administrative staff). In the secondary school context, these included BoM members, principals (including deputy principals), teachers of religious education, and all other teaching staff. To take account of the distinctions in the two contexts, the surveys incorporated a number of additional or differently worded questions specific to each environment. The table below gives a breakdown of the number of respondents at both levels.

Table 1 Number of survey respondents at primary and second levels

Cohort	Primary	Secondary	Total
Board of Management	1,162	95	1,257
Principal or Deputy Principal	1,111	117	1,228
Teachers - Classroom or Subject	794	302	1,096
RE Teacher		129	129
Other Staff	122	74	196
Total	3,189	717	3,906

At the close of each questionnaire, respondents were invited to self-select for follow-up interviews by inserting their email address. All were assured that this information would be decoupled from their survey responses to protect anonymity. As a result, 52 interviews were conducted, 28 at primary level and 24 at second level. Survey data were collated and analysed thematically by means of frequency tables and cross tabulations. Qualitative data were analysed thematically using NVivo software (for a more detailed methodology, see Overview in this series).



Section Two

Religious Education and Catholic Primary Schools in Ireland

The teaching and learning of RE in a primary school is a matter for the patron delegated to the BoM (*Education Act 1998*). Section 30 of the *Education Act 1998* provides for RE and the right of patrons to design an RE curriculum for their schools. In Ireland today, 89 per cent of primary schools have a Catholic patron (usually the bishop of the local diocese). *The Primary curriculum framework: for primary and special schools* (Department of Education/NCCA 2023, hereafter, the Framework) recognises the right of school patrons to design a programme that can contribute to children's holistic development, 'particularly from the religious and/or ethical perspective, [that] underpins and supports the characteristic spirit of the school' (p.19). Whereas the Primary Curriculum of 1999 allowed 2.5 hours per week for RE, the Framework suggests 1 hour 40 minutes per week for Junior and Senior Infants and 2 hours per week for First Class to Sixth Class for the Patron's Programme. In Catholic schools, the Patron's Programme takes the form of RE.

The *Catholic preschool and primary religious education curriculum for Ireland* (CPPREC hereafter) (IEC 2015) serves as the basis for the development of RE programmes for Catholic primary schools in Ireland – in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland. Resonating with the understanding of RE in *SGN* (2010), this comprehensive curriculum aims to help children 'mature in relation to their spiritual, moral and religious lives, through their encounter with, exploration and celebration of the Catholic faith' (IEC 2015, p.31). It seeks ways to help children to develop 'an informed, mature response to God's call to relationship' (p.15). It lifts up the call to love one's neighbour and care for creation. It is important to remember that although it can be complementary, RE is distinct from catechesis, which specifically seeks to bring Christian people to a 'maturity of faith' (IEC 2010, p.59).

The CPPREC (2015) has a Trinitarian focus: 'the mystery of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is the centre of the curriculum' (IEC 2015, p.25). The central mystery of God as Trinity is the foundation that supports and orientates all that is taught in RE. This focus provides the organising principle for the four strands of the curriculum: Christian Faith, Word of God, Liturgy and Prayer, and Christian Morality. These strands overlap and interact to form a holistic learning experience for the child (Hession 2015, p.178). Alive to the reality of Irish classrooms, the curriculum is innovative in that it empowers teachers to take account of pupils' and families' diverse levels of commitment to the Catholic tradition. At the same time, it is open to all children whose parents wish them to learn about, from, and into the Christian religious tradition (Hession 2015, p.184). CPPREC (2015) is clear in this regard: faith should never be imposed or coerced. The approach to RE is always invitational. And so 'no pupil need receive or be present at, any religious education of which her or his parents or guardians disapprove' (IEC 2010, p.144). Echoing the key ecclesial documents (see above), CPPREC advises every Catholic primary school to have a policy on RE that includes such information (IEC 2010, p.145).

The approach to RE is always invitational.

Grow in Love

Grow in Love is the RE programme for Catholic primary schools from Junior Infants to Sixth Class. Commissioned by the IEC to support the implementation of CPPREC (2015), it borrows from the first letter of John to articulate the mystery of Trinity in the assertion 'God is love' (1 John 4:8,16) (O'Connell et al. 2023). This God, who is Trinity and love, is both personal and purposeful. The programme aims to help children notice and respond to the presence and action of God/Love in their lives, especially through their relationships with their families, friends and creation. God as love is made 'visible in the person of Jesus Christ' (O'Donnell et al. 2019, p.5). Jesus as the face of God is a central theme in the programme; children come to know the Jesus of history and are introduced to the Christ of faith. Lessons are organised around the liturgical calendar, with themes such as: Creation, Social Justice, Advent and Christmas, Holy Week and Easter, Eucharist and Morality. *Grow in Love* is also a very valuable resource for teachers (O'Farrell, 2023). Reflecting the vision of the key documents, it encourages partnership with the home through its At Home sections, and it is supported by online resources (IEC 2015–2019).



Religious Education and Catholic Second Level Schools in Ireland

There is great diversity of second level school patrons in Ireland, even within the Catholic voluntary sector (CSP 2014). Although some joint patronage models exist, Catholic schools now account for less than half of second level schools (Meehan and Laffan 2021). Most of these are under the patronage of lay trust bodies. However, the canonical responsibility for RE remains with the local ordinary; the bishop of every diocese is responsible for the Religious Education of Catholics within that diocese (Catholic Church 1983, #801–806).

Junior Cycle Religious Education

In contrast with the situation at primary level, there is no RE curriculum or IEC-commissioned programme for Catholic second level schools (although some Catholic materials are available). Instead, the IEC has co-operated with the developments in State-sponsored RE since the formation and implementation of the Junior Certificate Religious Education Syllabus of 2000. For historical reasons (see Meehan 2019), RE as a subject on the second level curriculum came about only with the *Education Act 1998*; previously a system of confessional, denominational RE prevailed, in line with the almost exclusive denominational patronage system.

In line with the reform of the Junior Cycle, in 2019 the Junior Certificate Religious Education Syllabus was replaced with the specification for Junior Cycle Religious Education (JC RE) (NCCA 2019). This specification is intended for all students, whatever their religious faith or worldview, exposing them to a broad range of religious traditions and to the non-religious interpretation of life (NCCA 2019, p.4). It does not 'provide religious instruction in any particular religious or faith tradition' (Department of Education and Skills 2018, p.2). The accompanying guidelines from the Irish Catholic bishops entitled *Junior Cycle Religious Education in the Catholic School* (Council for Catechetics of the Irish Episcopal Conference 2019) offer a broad theological framework for adopting the specification for Catholic schools.

In a significant departure from historical practice and international norms, following the reform of Junior Cycle, the Irish State advises that RE at second level is optional. Accordingly, 'schools have discretion to determine if they provide the subject at all or if it is to be mandatory or optional in any particular class group or year' (Department of Education and Skills 2018). There is no expectation from the State that schools should provide for the religious literacy or development of their students. In short, although RE continues as a State-certified subject, schools may reduce the time allocation for RE or drop it from the curriculum entirely.



Senior Cycle Religious Education



Students at Senior Cycle can engage with RE in two ways. The first is to take it as a subject for the Leaving Certificate examination and follow the comprehensive Leaving Certificate Religious Education (LCRE) syllabus of 2006. Mirroring the approach taken at Junior Cycle, the LCRE syllabus was developed by the NCCA on behalf of the State, in consultation with various partners including the Catholic community. This way of studying RE is often referred to as 'exam RE'.

However, during initial discussions on LCRE, it became clear that most schools favour a non-examination approach to RE in Senior Cycle, and a parallel approach was developed. Rather than a syllabus, the *Senior Cycle Curriculum Framework* (SCCF hereafter) offers a structure for planning an RE programme for Senior Cycle (NCCA 2005, pp.151–169). There is a strong relationship between the SCCF and the syllabus for Leaving Certificate Religious Education; for instance, the aims of RE and some sections are common to both:

In exposing students to a broad range of religious issues, religious traditions and ways of understanding the human search for meaning, the framework can help contribute to the spiritual and moral development of students from all faiths and none. It can also help develop a healthy respect for the beliefs of others and an openness to dialogue in search of mutual understanding. (p.152).

On the other hand, the SCCF offers a considerably less detailed specification than the Leaving Certificate course. It is shorter and offers more choice and scope for creativity for teachers and schools. Designed as a two-year framework, it can be extended to cover a three-year Senior Cycle if transition year is to be included. In the Catholic sector, the vast majority of schools and students have opted for the SCCF path of non-examination Senior Cycle RE. Regardless of the path pursued, the requirement from the IEC is for RE to be taught by qualified teachers for two hours per week for students in Catholic schools (Junior and Senior Cycles).

Because of the recent incremental move from the Junior Certificate Religious Education Syllabus (2000) to the specification of 2019, this study focuses on SCCF Religious Education (henceforth SCORE) rather than RE at Junior Cycle.

The Diocesan Advisor

Under the Code of Canon Law (1983), every bishop is responsible for the Religious Education of the Catholics in his diocese (Catholic Church 1983, #801–806). Following the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), a model arose in Ireland whereby the bishop of every diocese appoints a diocesan advisor (DA hereafter) to oversee and support RE and the faith life of the schools in that diocese. *SGN* (IEC 2010) confirms this model, referring to ‘trained Diocesan Advisors for Religious Education who will support the principal and those teaching Religious Education, encouraging and resourcing the school in supporting and informing the faith of Catholic students’ (2010, p. 209).

In order to support and standardise the role, the Irish Catholic Bishop’s Conference (ICBC) published a handbook entitled *The role of the diocesan advisor for post-primary Religious Education* (2013) (hereafter, the Handbook). According to the Handbook, the role includes supporting and resourcing RE; school visits; assisting in the appointment of RE teachers and chaplains; reporting to the bishop; organising in-service training for RE teachers; and evaluating RE. The proposed model of evaluation recognises the strengths of a school’s RE programme and views any shortcomings in the context of a willingness to assist the school’s authorities (p.11). No similar handbook exists for primary level, but a similar understanding of the role is reflected in recent advertisements for the position, with explicit mention of advising and supporting teachers in the *Grow in Love* programme.

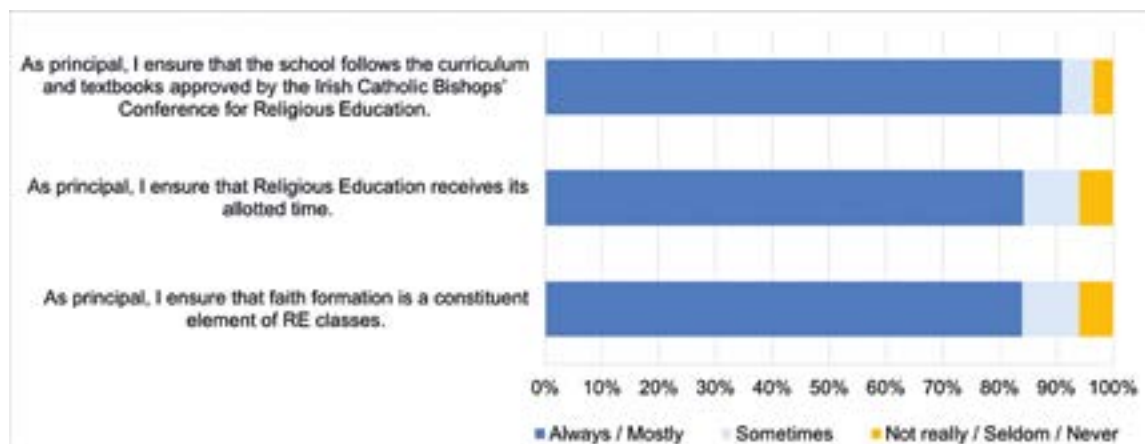
A recent study of the DA system at second level found that of the 26 dioceses in Ireland, 3 employ full-time DAs, 12 dioceses fill the role with part-time DAs, and 4 engage full-time personnel whose briefs include other pastoral roles. The position was vacant in six dioceses (Sexton and McCormack 2021). The study found no standardised approach to the brief: some DAs prioritise the provision of support over evaluation, while others focus on the evaluative element of the role. In many cases, DAs refrained completely from conducting evaluations of RE. Perhaps this is unsurprising, given the changing landscape in Catholic schools. O’Connell (2012) asserts that DAs work in a rapidly evolving environment, with an increasing spectrum of religious beliefs, traditions, worldviews and ways of belonging present in schools. In this context, DAs must be able to enter into dialogue with those outside and within their own faith tradition, make sense of the Christian tradition in a new and changing landscape within the Catholic school, and ‘find clues to faith that can resonate with the experience of whosoever they speak to today’ (p.2).



Findings RE at Primary Level

At first glance, the findings regarding RE in primary schools looks reassuring for the Catholic community: 84 per cent of principals state that they ensure that RE receives its allotted time (of 2.5 hours per week, reduced to 2 hours per week under the 2023 Framework), and an impressive 91 per cent report they always or mostly ensure that the CPPREC (2015) is always followed and the *Grow in Love* textbooks are used. Faith formation is a constituent element in RE classes, according to 84 per cent. Figure 5.1 shows the details of principals' responses with regard to RE in their schools.

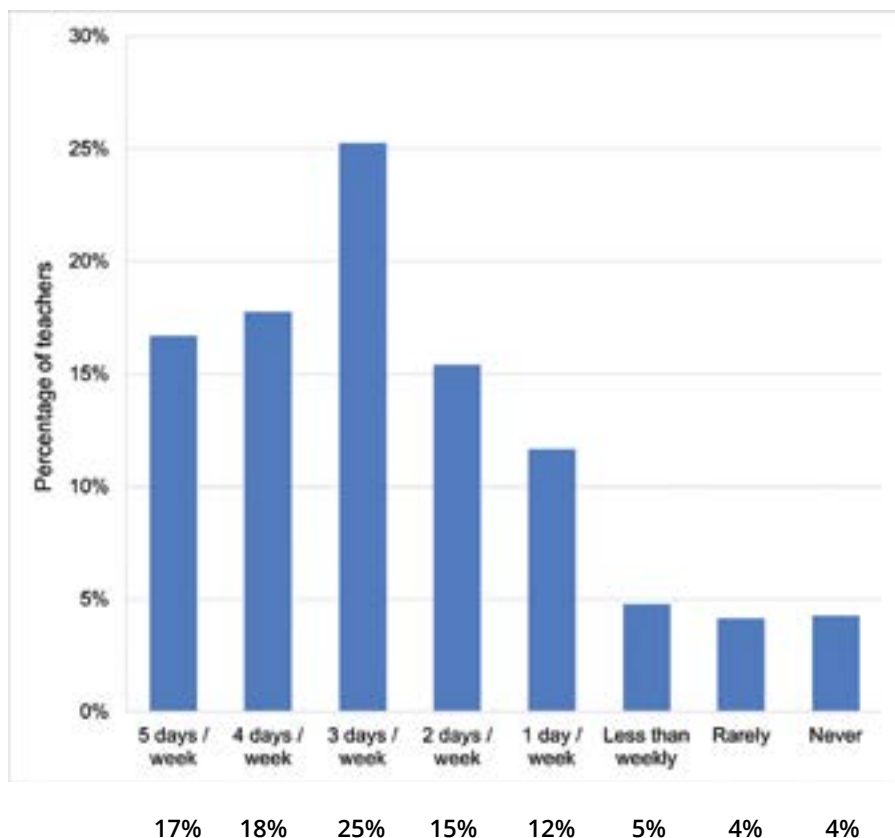
Figure 5.1 Principals' roles and perspectives in relation to RE



However, the data from other cohorts tell quite a different story regarding the meeting of these RE requirements. For instance, only 35 per cent of BoM members state that they ensure RE receives its allotted time, with a similar proportion stating they ensure that the school follows the curriculum and textbooks approved by the IEC (for the role and responsibilities of the BoM, see Report 6). Moreover, as Figure 5.2 illustrates, the findings indicate that just 17 per cent of teachers teach RE every day, 25 per cent on three days, and 40 per cent twice a week or less.



Figure 5.2 Frequency with which RE is taught as reported by primary teachers



Data from teachers further reveal that:

- 33 per cent of teachers follow the curriculum and textbooks approved by the ICBC only to some/a limited extent, and 5 per cent not at all.
- Just over 50 per cent state that their RE classes include faith formation, prayer, sacramental experience, and awareness of the stewardship of God's creation to a large extent (as set out in CSP 2019).

While the *Grow in Love* homework book is a key mechanism designed to encourage the home/school partnership of the key ecclesial documents, 53 per cent of teachers state that pupils in their class use the *Grow in Love* homework book, 38 per cent send it home with a specific task/request either weekly or on two or three occasions per month, and 37 per cent never send it home.

At interview stage, almost all participants admitted that the actual provision of RE is quite different from expectations. For instance, one principal reported that in her experience 'the majority of schools claim to be Catholic, but they are only Catholic in name. They tick all the boxes for First Communion and Confirmation, and they do a little bit of Religious Education here and there'. One BoM member also shared this view, asking: 'While there may be some bit of structure around First Communion and Confirmation classes, what about all the other classes in between?'

Teacher autonomy emerged as a distinctive factor where this impoverished provision occurs: while principals can ask that teachers allow the expected time and follow the expected approach, 'there's an element of personal choice and personal faith'. Principals explained that where timetabling and teaching resources are concerned, teachers are largely autonomous in their own classrooms: 'I can no longer assume that the teachers will prioritise it, I can just ask.' Some teachers confirmed this reality: 'I don't have a lot of belief, so I modify the programme towards my own beliefs.'

The qualitative evidence uncovers some solid RE in line with the CPPREC (2015), rooted in the *Grow in Love* programme, with comments such as:

- 'We use *Grow in Love*, and there is prayer in the morning and at lunchtime. And we celebrate the religious events like St Patrick's Day and St Bridget's day, etc.'
- 'We have the sacraments and the "Do this in memory of me" Masses.'
- 'We talk about the work of programmes like the Lenten campaign and help children to see that others are less well off.'

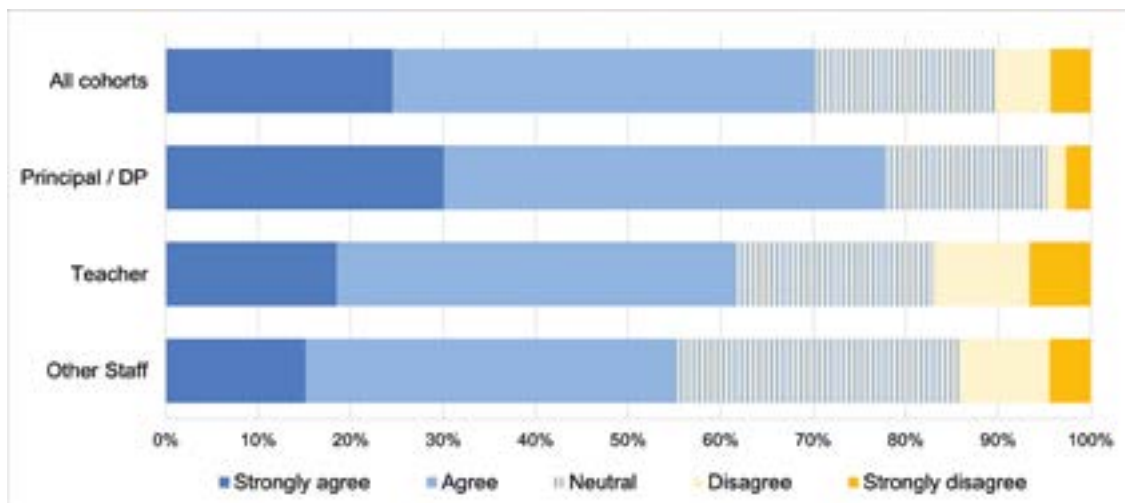
Teachers are clearly sensitive to the presence of pupils of faiths and worldviews other than Christian, and the importance of allowing them the freedom to participate appropriately. For instance, as Figure 5.3 represents, 71 per cent of respondents agreed that students of a faith other than Christian have the freedom to express their faiths while in their schools, and over half agreed with the statement that 'students of faiths other than Christian, and those of humanist and secular beliefs, are welcomed to practise their beliefs in this school'.

“I don't have a lot of belief, so I modify the programme towards my own beliefs.”



Photo: Laurenz Kleinheider on Unsplash

Figure 5.3 Extent to which respondents agree or disagree with the statement that ‘pupils of faiths other than Christian, and those of humanist and secular beliefs, have the freedom to express their beliefs in this school’



At the same time, they recognise the challenge this presents, with comments such as ‘at least half of the children in my classroom are not Catholic, so you’re trying to manage that half of the class and give them alternative work while you are addressing the other half’. The sense from the data was a commitment to inclusion, particularly of children of other faiths and worldviews. This particular finding is supported by a 2023 study which found that Irish teachers demonstrate a ‘heightened focus on cultural and religious diversity as a central issue within their teaching’ (Cho et al. 2023, p.1021).

“ At least half of the children in my classroom are not Catholic, so you’re trying to manage that half of the class and give them alternative work while you are addressing the other half. ”



Photo: Jorge Dominguez on Unsplash

Why Some Teachers Are Not Fully Meeting RE Requirements

From the qualitative data, principals offered three main reasons why some teachers are not fully meeting RE requirements. The first was personal faith/commitment to RE, with comments such as 'maybe people don't place importance on it anymore and people have different opinions on the programme itself', and 'teachers don't believe what they are teaching, so it's an exercise in futility to do something that's just not there'.

The second reason involved time pressures and an overloaded curriculum: 'the day when we taught every subject every day is disappearing'; for RE 'you might try to give it a good 20 minutes'; 'nobody does religion for 30 minutes a day, nor do I have an expectation that they would'; 'there needs to be flexibility about religion being taught every day, three days a week is probably accurate'.

Data suggest a concern shared by leaders and teachers that RE as a 'soft target' will be further pushed aside with the implementation of the new Framework, with even more new programmes/initiatives being introduced, including a European language.

This frustration with an overloaded curriculum did not translate into an unwillingness to teach RE. When asked how they feel about teaching RE, more than half (54%) of teachers show largely high personal conviction with regard to teaching RE, over a quarter (27%) are neutral, and almost a fifth (19%) show some reluctance. Indeed, the qualitative data suggest that where RE is being taught, it is taught well. Instances from the qualitative data include consistent RE teaching and learning using *Grow in Love*, prayer, celebration of religious events, liturgy, and practice of social justice like the Lenten campaign. However, many principals appeared to be resigned to the inevitability that 'with schools being so busy and being constantly challenged on their timetable', religion is bound to suffer. They are sympathetic to the pressures of curriculum overload and stand by their teachers, with comments such as:

- 'My teachers do their very best in the classroom, the priority here is for children to learn to read and write.'
- 'They just can't get around to RE.'
- 'If they take on a science project then they're probably not doing music and drama and other things, including religion, because you have to pick and choose.'

“ Nobody does religion for 30 minutes a day, nor do I have an expectation that they would. ”

“ More than half (54%) of teachers show largely high personal conviction with regard to teaching RE. ”

“ If I didn't teach religion for three days out of five, nobody would be any the wiser. ”

While they voiced considerable justification for this, there was also a sense of regret: ‘over eight years in school, pupils get a good spread of what the teachers can do best with the time they have’, but they agreed that ‘unfortunately, religion does get left behind’.

Lack of external support and oversight of RE formed the third reason advanced by principals to explain why a sizeable proportion of teachers are not meeting the RE requirements. Although a dominant theme among all groups, principals in particular were exercised by the lack of support and Continuing Professional Development (CPD hereafter) for teachers and the lack of oversight for RE. One principal remembered looking for a summer course for RE a few years ago and there was very little available and very little advertised. The sense emerged from principals that if no one outside the school is monitoring RE then they cannot tackle it alone: ‘religion is on everyone’s timetable, but I don’t have time to pop my head into every classroom every day to see if it’s been done’. Some teachers echoed this: one starkly pointed out ‘if I didn’t teach religion for three days out of five, nobody would be any the wiser’, and suggests a unified school approach because ‘otherwise there will be gaps and nobody knows about them’. There is no easy answer to this. ‘The big problem is teachers are not expected to have a monthly account of what they do in religion, [yet] if you go down that route, you could be really getting people’s backs up and upsetting people.’

“ *If they take on a science project then they’re probably not doing music and drama and other things, including religion, because you have to pick and choose.* ”

The need for CPD for teachers that goes beyond curricular/programme support also emerged from the findings, for instance:

- ‘[support] to be given by somebody who has practical experience, someone used to working with children’
- ‘something in the spiritual realm is most needed [for teachers]. Gathering to tease out scripture and get into the depths of our relationship with God and who God is for us, because if we’re vocationally not there, then it’s very dry.’

The patchy presence of policy statements on RE may be another contributory factor to the lack of a standardised approach to RE in and across schools. Only 35 per cent of principals reported that the school had a policy statement on RE that to a large extent includes faith formation, prayer, sacramental experiences, and awareness of God’s creation. Another factor may be the relationship between the school and the DA. Both the quantitative and qualitative data indicate a range of experiences of the DA function. The extent to which the DA is an influence on RE is quite complex and is discussed further below.

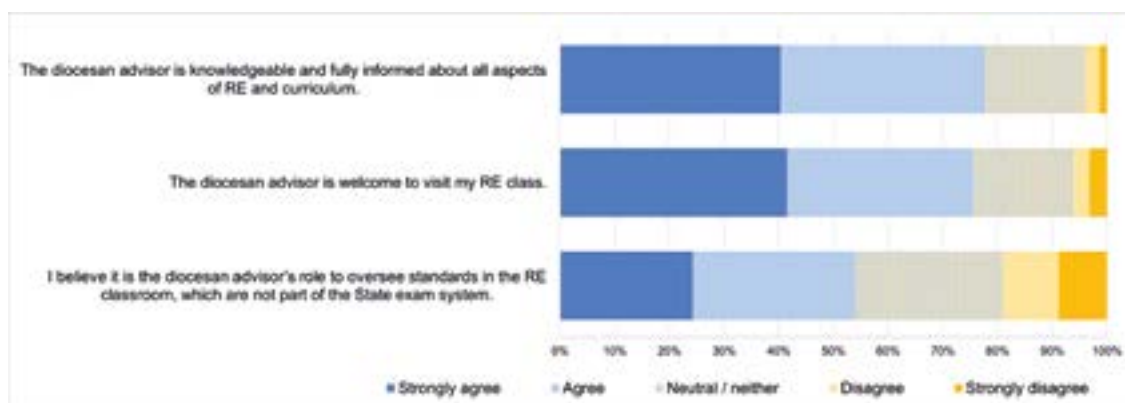


Photo: Taylor Flowe on Unsplash

The Role of the Diocesan Advisor

As the representative of the local ordinary, the DA has an important role in supporting and monitoring the quality and quantity of RE in the Catholic school. Experiences with DAs vary considerably and even more so since the COVID pandemic and resulting restrictions of 2020–2021. As Figure 5.4 indicates, for 75 per cent of teachers, the DA is welcome to visit their class and is knowledgeable and fully informed about all aspects of RE and the curriculum.

Figure 5.4 Perspectives on the role of the diocesan advisor



Whereas almost 80 per cent of principals meet with the DA when they visit, approximately 20 per cent reported that a DA had not visited the school over the past three years. However, frequency of DA visits to the school may be something of a red herring. The data suggest that schools experience the visit as a momentary hassle rather than a meaningful method of oversight, support and improvement. For instance, one principal described how, when they hear the DA is due, ‘teachers say “we have done nothing on this [aspect of RE] all year” and would then be busy preparing for the visit’. Teacher responses concur. For instance:

- ‘When we know they’re coming we have to get stuff ready.’
- ‘There’s a flurry of activity and everyone wants photocopying done.’
- ‘Suddenly everyone whips out their sacred space.’

This experience of once-a-year ‘policing’ rather than meaningful evaluation and/or support was prevalent in the data, while 25 per cent of teachers interviewed had never heard of the term ‘diocesan advisor’ and had no idea of their role.

On the other hand, the qualitative data highlight instances where the DA role is effective and appreciated and valued. Two board members reported that the DA role was working well in their school, based on principal reports, with one describing it as ‘an important link between the school and the diocese’. In one instance, there was a particularly positive response to the DA. Teachers who have positive experiences with their DA described the support they receive – ‘our advisor is a lovely person’ – but qualified their statements in the light of the current reality – ‘our school is so big now he just comes into sacrament classes’.

To conclude, key themes emerging from the findings of RE at primary level include varying degrees of RE provision across the primary school sector, most of it less than what is required by the patron; reasons for this variety of provision are many and complex; Catholic primary schools are places where children of other faiths and worldviews can express their religious beliefs and, to a lesser extent, practise them; whereas there is evidence of individual DAs fulfilling a supportive role, this is not a systematic method of oversight, support and/or improvement; there is very little accountability or CPD for RE, with all cohorts expressing the need for meaningful support.

Findings RE at Second Level

Two findings emerge regarding non-exam Senior Cycle Religious Education (SCRE), which was the focus of this study. These stand in marked contrast to each other: whereas some isolated evidence emerged of positive attitudes and experiences of well-taught, well-supported SCRE, significant concern for negative attitudes, poor practice, and lack of support was the dominant theme.

Positive Attitudes to and Experiences of SCRE

In schools where RE is valued, supported by senior management, and taught well, there was evidence of positive attitudes to and experiences of RE. From the qualitative data, two participants described how respect for SCRE goes hand in hand with good teaching and learning in the subject. When it is presented in a mature and serious manner, students really engage with it. Some participants reported high levels of support from school leaders:

- 'We are very well supported in the RE space in our school and there are three RE teachers and each of us is experienced in teaching RE.'
- 'Management are very adamant that we come up with a good plan, it means RE is appreciated and it's not overlooked, it's treated as an important subject, which helps.'

This can lead to positive experiences not just for students but for the larger school community. An interesting innovation that emerged from the data involved a visit by the State Inspectorate, which helped one school to make sure correct policies were in place and to involve students in policy development. Afterwards, the principal extended this to get the students involved in devising a faith policy.

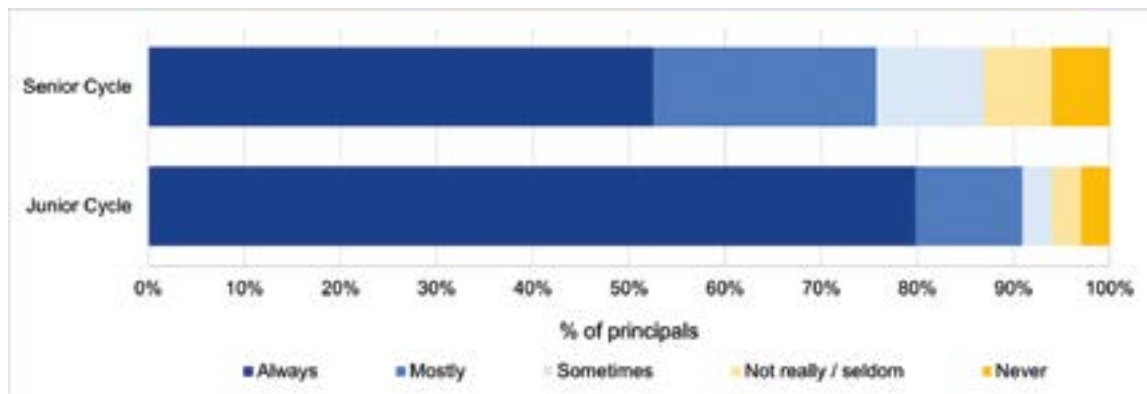
Resonant with the findings at primary level, teachers are clearly sensitive to the presence of pupils of faiths and worldviews other than Christian, and the importance of allowing them the freedom to participate appropriately. For instance, in over 80 per cent of RE classes, students of a faith other than Christian have the freedom, to a large extent, to express their faith, while in almost all other RE classes, they have the freedom to do so to some extent.

However, the qualitative data indicate a noticeable concern for SCRE among almost all participants.

Concern for SCRE

For many participants, SCRE is in a perilous state. As Figure 5.5 shows, whereas almost 80 per cent of principals report allocating at least two hours per week to RE for all Junior Cycle classes, this proportion falls to just over half (53%) for all Senior Cycle classes.

Figure 5.5 Frequency with which principals allocate at least two hours per week to RE, by cycle



Rooted in the absence of standardised content, pedagogy and approach, a lack of oversight, and a perceived devaluing of RE, concern for SCRE was a dominant theme in the qualitative findings. An overall sense of SCRE as directionless pervades the data. Evidence emerged from this data of:

a) The practice of teachers of other subjects withdrawing students from RE class.

Teachers report that students are routinely withdrawn from RE for non-RE-related activities:

- ‘During a couple of weeks recently, I lost half of my sixth-year class for extra Physics lessons. I wasn’t even asked, it’s kind of what happens and there is not a lot you can do about that.’
- ‘[Other teachers say] “I’ll take you for your Irish or French or Spanish oral during religion class because that’s not an exam subject.” I think people do it unconsciously, but it does happen.’
- ‘There are schools out there where religion is on the timetable but instead of teaching religion to the full class, many students are withdrawn [and] taught applied maths/something else for somebody else’.
- ‘You teach your own subject in your own time, and you don’t go pilfering off others ... there can be give and take, but not to the extent that I see it happening.’

“ During a couple of weeks recently, I lost half of my sixth-year class for extra Physics lessons. I wasn’t even asked, it’s kind of what happens and there is not a lot you can do about that. ”

This is recently compounded by the introduction of mandatory hours in wellbeing at the expense of RE. On the other hand, where there is ‘full involvement of all students in RE classes, there is no opt-out sought from Religious Education classes’.

b) Poor teaching/lack of standards

Participants from all cohorts shared a concern around lack of standards at SCRE, describing how the content of RE can be decided based on the interests of staff, with no coordination to ensure that a full SCRE Curriculum Framework experience is taught. For instance, areas such as mental health, human dignity, justice, religion and science depend on the interests of staff: if ‘somebody’s interested in a particular area’, then they can decide to teach that; if not, then it doesn’t get taught. ‘There was one [Senior Cycle module] on Scripture, but the teacher retired, and nobody seems to have come along to pick that up.’ Other comments include:

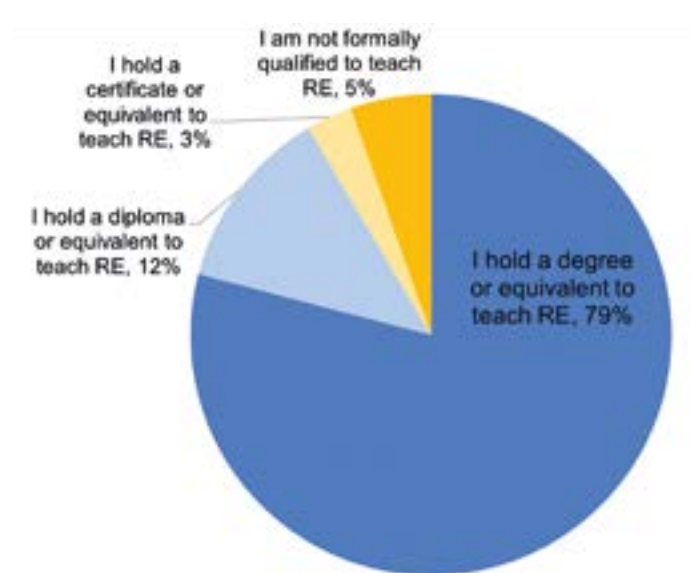
- ‘[We have] the freedom this year to go off book and to address whatever [comes] up in class.’ ‘Anything can be put into that class because there’s a huge knowledge gap.’
- ‘It needs breadth and depth. RE needs a massive overhaul and needs to be more relevant to students today.’
- ‘Essentially each teacher can do their own thing and there’s not a whole lot you could really do about that.’
- ‘The Trust has got to be a little bit more critical of the Religious Education that is being taught in their schools.’

“Anything can be put into that class because there’s a huge knowledge gap.”

Some teachers advised that, whereas teaching RE at Senior Cycle may not be easy, with effort in planning and good methodologies such as ‘active learning, problem solving, and group work research’, RE is very beneficial to the students, and you get an awful lot more out of them’. Two principals rooted the problem in the appointment of unqualified RE teachers. However, as Figure 5.6 illustrates, almost 80 per cent of those teaching RE hold a degree-level qualification or equivalent.

Figure 5.6 RE teachers’ qualifications

Board members can be aware of the problem, with comments such as: ‘It [RE] is in a very poor condition, depending who senior management are allocating to it’, and ‘it seems to be more wellbeing [than] religion’. They seem unaware of their own agency and responsibility, or perhaps feel unable to address it.



c) (Lack of) school community support for RE

Participants described how parents can undermine the value of RE by seeking to have their child exempted from it if it is on last class in the evening or first class in the morning. The home/school partnership (or absence of it) was referenced as problematic, with comments such as:

- 'Parents determine if their children are brought to church', and 'when they are, the understanding [and connection] is stronger'.
- 'Schools can do things really well and celebrate the occasions and the feasts, but no matter what we do, it's not supported [by many] homes.'
- While there are 'some fantastic families, they're very much in the minority and even if you look at the numbers in our churches now compared to the pre-pandemic time, the numbers are much less'.

Support (or the lack of it) from the Senior Management Team also emerged as a theme here (see above).

One RE teacher has experienced apathy among RE teachers in their school: 'I've been disillusioned with those who have been in leadership positions [in the RE team]. I find a certain amount of apathy. This apathy can be more about a lack of "religious zeal" or spiritual background and I find that difficult to work with', and 'if I were the head of the school's RE department, then yes, I think there should be oversight'. Due to a lack of leadership within the RE team, this teacher resorted to going it alone, adopting the attitude of 'preferring to be left to my own devices, actually'.



Photo: ThisisEngineering RAEng on Unsplash

However, this shared concern did not translate into indifference or resignation about the future of SCRE. Rather, the data suggest an appetite and willingness to address the issue. One principal would like 'the patron or the Church to give direction [but] there would be no benefit in evaluating RE through a checklist'. On the other hand, if there was collaboration on 'how best to deliver non-exam RE, then this would be of great value to the religion teachers and the principal'. The data suggest an openness to improving SCRE and that where RE is supported inside and outside the classroom, it can add to the life of the school in valued ways.

d) Oversight of RE

There was almost universal agreement that RE can thrive and make a positive impact on the lives of students and the school community only with support and oversight from the patron and trustees. Both principals and RE teachers lamented that currently there is little or no oversight of RE from any source and no one is being held accountable at a formal level. 'Evaluation and subsequent feedback' could play an effective role with teachers who are 'producing fantastic content but might not be meeting the strict Catholic ethos of the school', or teachers who are 'not connecting with the students or who are watching videos'. Board members also voiced this view, for instance that the (Catholic) Church has invested little in its oversight of RE and is unwilling to spend money on training and in-service:

“ If there was collaboration on how best to deliver non-exam RE, then this would be of great value to the religion teachers and the principal. ”

The bishop, as patron also needs to be critical of the Religious Education being taught in the schools. While the diocesan advisor can provide excellent support, there are limitations to this service.

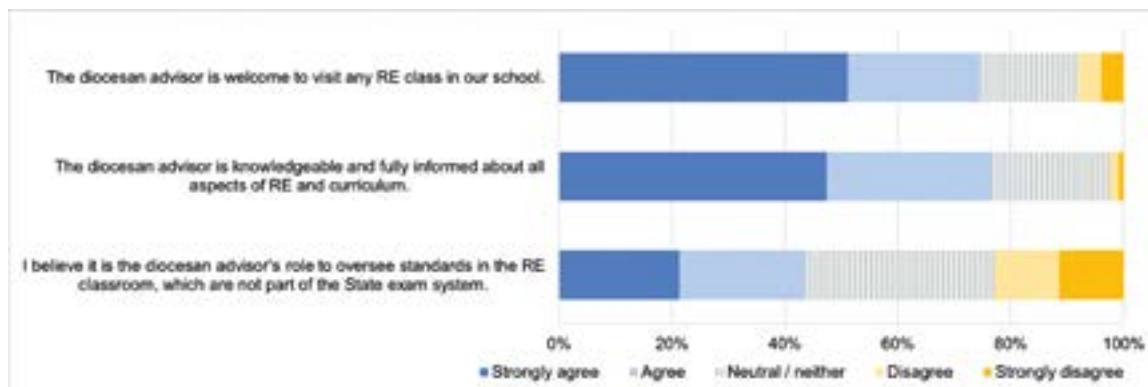
Critique of the effectiveness of the role of the DA was a dominant theme in this regard.

Oversight of RE: The Role of the Diocesan Advisor

RE teachers were presented with a series of statements about the DA and his/her role. As Figure 5.7 shows:

- Over three-quarters of RE teachers state that the DA is welcome to visit any RE class in the school and that he/she is knowledgeable and fully informed about all aspects of RE and the curriculum.
- A much smaller proportion of RE teachers believe that the DA's role is to oversee standards in the RE classroom, which are not part of the State exam system; just one in five RE teachers strongly agrees with this statement.

Figure 5.7 Extent to which RE teachers agree or disagree with given statements about the role of the DA



Although the evaluative role of the DA is clearly sanctioned in the Handbook, just over 40 per cent of RE teachers hold the view that evaluation is part of the DA brief. Mixed experiences and understandings of the role also emerged among BoM members. For instance:

- 'The DA does not evaluate what's going on in the classroom. They are not there to be an inspector; their role is merely as a mediator.'
- The DA 'only meets whoever the principal allows [them] to meet. They're not free to go to the classrooms'.

Another highlighted their experience with a very proactive DA and recounted a time when the DA 'complained about an underperforming RE teacher' to the principal, thereby taking some steps towards addressing deficits in the quality of delivery. This BoM member also pointed out that they were not aware of the bishops' directive, and again it was the DA that drew attention to it:

I wasn't aware that the bishops' directive is two hours for RE per week to tell you the truth. The DA actually said students aren't getting their two hours, and how that doesn't hang well with her. I'm more aware of what the trust bodies and the diocese are trying to do, you know, to protect and ringfence Religious Education but it's good that somebody is aware of it and people are going to fight the corner from now on.

Teacher experience of the DA is very mixed. For some, the DA role was limited to providing teaching resources; others were unaware of the DA role and had never met a DA.

- [The DA visit is] 'really just a check-in' which offers nothing regarding 'individual practice'.
- [The role of the DA is] 'maybe to offer advice, consolation – which a lot of people need when they teach Senior Cycle religion. It's considered one of the hardest classes to have – non-exam senior religion – it's not highly sought after.'
- [I have] 'met him twice already, this year' and 'receive resources every month'. An in-service was organised 'which was great, and I know there's a lot of support there as well, if you want to take the support, it's there for you'.
- 'She gives us loads of resources and visits us quite a lot. And she would send us a lot of resources at various times of the year, and she also organises in-services for the RE teachers as well, so she's particularly good, she's very on the ball. But she does not take responsibility for RE delivery in the school.'

Form of Oversight

Participants identified focus on the quality and oversight of RE as a priority for patrons and trusts. However, the type of oversight is important:

... if someone did not not have an open mind as to the existence of religion in the students' lives. I think it could be at loggerheads. I think if someone was there with a clipboard, seeing if I was meeting the standards, I would resist that.'

However, there was almost universal agreement that some type of inspection/evaluation has a role to play in improving standards in non-exam RE. It needs:

... a reimagining of a framework [so that] we could all be singing off the same hymn sheet ... Because at the moment, it's such a laissez faire approach ... You can have teachers who are producing fantastic content ... And you've got a lot of teachers who are watching videos in class. And unfortunately, there's no oversight of that. So, from that perspective, I think evaluation would work. But there needs to be a consistent basis for months to work off beforehand.

“ You can have teachers who are producing fantastic content ... And you've got a lot of teachers who are watching videos in class. And unfortunately, there's no oversight of that. ”

A final theme to emerge from the data is the role of informal RE. The activities RE teachers undertake in Catholic schools frequently go beyond teaching and learning of RE in the classroom. This is sometimes referred to as 'RE outside the classroom'.

RE Outside the Classroom

RE teachers are often seen to have a key role in upholding a schools' Catholic identity. Whereas their primary role, like teachers of any other subject, is the teaching and learning of RE, their expertise gives them a particular ability in areas such as leading school liturgies and retreats and managing the sacred space. All RE teacher participants in this study spoke about their work both inside and outside the RE classroom, including events to mark the liturgical year (Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter); Opening of School Year Masses and Graduation Masses; organising retreats; Catholic Schools' Week; and Founder's Day celebrations, as well as school committees for fundraising and ethos. Two respondents described praying with students at moments of stress. This can be a significant aspect of their work. Principals described how students in general respect, enjoy and benefit from events such as liturgy, retreats and the Graduation Mass. Over-reliance on RE teachers to hold/lead the school ethos also emerged as a theme. As one principal observes, 'it can't just be left to RE teachers. We have to find ways of engaging more [staff] to lead ethos within the school'. It can be a lonely role if support from other staff members is not forthcoming.



Photo: Tom Delanoue on Unsplash

In summary, the overall sense from the data was that SCRE is directionless, increasingly devalued, and very much in need of support and oversight.

Section Three

Discussion

The findings outlined in this report pose both challenges and opportunities for RE in Catholic schools. Inclusion of children of other faiths and worldviews is evident, echoing the findings of Cho et al. (2023) who found that Irish teachers demonstrate 'a heightened focus on cultural and religious diversity as a central issue' (p.1021). However, the experience of these children to practice their faiths and beliefs warrants further investigation. In both sectors, there is some evidence of good practice and commitment to RE. This is particularly true of the primary sector. Instances from the qualitative data include consistent use of *Grow in Love*, prayer, celebration of religious events, liturgy, and practice of social justice like the Lenten campaign. Although it is difficult to be conclusive in this regard, it does resonate with the research of Smyth et al. (2016) which found that children were generally positive about the religious and moral education (RME) they received, regardless of the specific form it took. They liked much of the content of the course (especially the 'stories') as well as the more active teaching methodology generally used in RME class. Most of the children interviewed indicated that they would still take RME class if they did not 'have to', and many suggested that they would like to see more time devoted to this subject area' (p.118).

However, it is clear that the vision for RE in the four Irish ecclesial documents is reflected in schools only to a limited extent. Evidence was lacking for all three indicators of primary level RE (CSP 2019) outlined in Section One. For instance, 33 per cent of teachers follow the curriculum and textbooks approved by the IBC only to some/a limited extent, and 5 per cent not at all. Just over 50 per cent state that their RE classes include faith formation opportunities. Only 35 per cent of principals reported that the school had a policy statement on RE that to a large extent includes faith formation, prayer, sacramental experiences, and awareness of God's creation.

The findings indicate that many schools are not meeting RE requirements such as time allocation and use of the *Grow in Love* programme (primary). A number of reasons emerged for this, such as teacher autonomy in the classroom, lack of personal faith/commitment, and disconnect between their beliefs

and the Catholic tradition. Indicative comments include 'maybe people don't place importance on it anymore and people have different opinions on the programme itself', and 'teachers don't believe what they are teaching, so it's an exercise in futility to do something that's just not there'. This resonates with a recent study among students beginning Initial Teacher Education (ITE) for primary teaching (O'Connell et al. 2023), which found that while belief in God is still remarkably high among ITE students, despite the societal challenges (Taylor 2004), the disconnect between their beliefs and the Catholic tradition is significant. Most students profess some of the core religious beliefs that cohere with the underpinning identity of Catholic schools and the RE they teach: they believe in God and God is important in their lives. However, it is significant that when it comes to their understanding/image of God, over one-third of student teachers don't know what to think.

Time for RE was a dominant issue at primary level, with serious concern for the quality and standard of RE at Senior Cycle an almost universal theme among second level participants.

Other failures to meet basic RE requirements emerge from the data such as the home/school partnership called for in the ecclesial documents. For instance, the mechanism designed to encourage home/school partnership – sending home the *Grow in Love* homework book – is routinely underused, with 37 per cent of teachers never sending it home.

Time for RE was a dominant issue with serious concern for the quality and standard of RE at Senior Cycle an almost universal theme among second level participants. The sense of SCRE as directionless and devalued was clear. Lack of support and oversight emerged as a factor in this regard. In short, the findings undermine the vision of RE in the ecclesial documents as essential to holistic education and integral to the curriculum. They also suggest a dereliction of duty to families who wish to have their children educated 'in accord with their religious beliefs' (CSP 2014 p.25).

It is clear from the findings that investment in professional structures to support RE in Catholic primary and secondary schools is urgently required. Findings at both levels indicate that a model of support and oversight is urgently needed. They highlight two related dimensions of RE in need of immediate structural attention: ongoing support and professional development for teachers, and a systematic model of oversight.

a) Ongoing support and professional development for teachers

Support for RE as a subject, and for RE teachers and leaders, is a widely held concern among participants, who identified focus on the quality of RE as a priority for patrons and trusts. The plight of SCRE as a subject is particularly serious. With no curriculum or programmes for RE in Catholic second levels school in existence, there appears to be little guidance or accountability for SCRE. At the same time, the findings suggest an opportunity in the openness of stakeholders – leaders, teachers and board members – to good-quality CPD; for instance, over half of primary teachers indicate high personal conviction with regard to teaching RE. Providing support for teachers of RE in sustained and life-giving ways is an important first step. Ongoing, high-quality CPD by means of regional, highly trained, diocesan specialists coordinating the service is one possible approach (Sexton and McCormack, 2021).

Whereas there are some instances of appreciation and effectiveness of individual DAs, as a systematic method of supporting and/or evaluating RE, it needs a radical overhaul. As far back as 1966 McConville found systematic flaws with this model. This finding echoes that of Sexton and McCormack (2021), who conclude that the lack of investment in professionalising the role across the decades since Vatican II has left it unfit for purpose in a climate where other aspects of school life have been professionalised.

b) Systematic oversight

Findings at both primary and secondary level reveal that a model of oversight is urgently needed. Whereas the Catholic Church in Ireland does not have a standardised mechanism for evaluation, the Irish State has a well-developed school inspection system, ranging from assessment of individual subjects to Whole School Evaluation (WSE). As patrons' programmes, RE (primary) and non-exam RE (second level) are not part of this system.

Schools in Ireland are willing to improve when professional structures for evaluation, improvement, and accountability are offered; for instance, BoMs and school leaders highly value the reports emanating from the State inspection process (Dillon 2012). Hislop (2017) attributes the success of the school Inspectorate to the commitment to co-professional evaluation and to a set of benchmarks to evaluate evidence to an extremely high level (Hislop 2017). This model has led to joint ventures with other groups, for example with Teagasc, the agricultural development authority, on quality measures for agricultural colleges using the co-professional and collaborative approaches developed for the schools' sector (Hislop 2017, p.17). On a much larger scale, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in 2015 collaborated with the Inspectorate to develop an education-focused inspection of early years' provision. Internationally, similar models have also met with success. For instance, Britain and Wales use such a system with the Office for Standards in Education and Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) under Section 48 of the Education Act 2005. Catholic schools may well benefit from a collaborative approach with the State Inspectorate, whereby the Church and State collaborate in oversight of RE.

Conclusion

The teaching and learning of RE in a school is a matter for the patron. The patron has the right and responsibility to ensure that its own programme is taught, and taught well. Patrons will take heart from the level of commitment and professionalism among stakeholders, particularly principals, and the abundance of good practice and commitment to the subject (inside and outside the classroom) at both primary and second level. However, the vision of RE as ‘an essential part of the curriculum’, with Catholic schools committing ‘resources and time to religious education as a matter of priority’ (ICBC 2008, p.4), has not translated into systemic reality at either primary or second level, with serious implications for schools that claim to be Catholic and for Catholic families who wish to have their children educated in accord with their religious beliefs.

Support for RE as a subject, and for RE teachers and leaders, is urgently needed. Providing ongoing, high-quality CPD for teachers of RE in sustained and life-giving ways is an important first step. A second step is the systematic evaluation of the teaching and learning of RE, perhaps through a collaborative model with the State Inspectorate.

The vision of RE as ‘an essential part of the curriculum’, with Catholic schools committing ‘resources and time to religious education as a matter of priority’ (ICBC 2008, p.4), has not translated into systemic reality at either primary or second level.



Photo: Sam Balye on Unsplash

Recommendation 1: A system of sustained, life-giving support for teachers of Religious Education needs to be developed and implemented in consultation with teachers as a matter of urgency.

Recommendation 2: A first step to address the plight of Senior Cycle Religious Education (SCRE) is the development of a set of indicators for second level RE, similar to those indicators for RE in primary schools (CSP 2019). This should include a programme/suite of programmes for SCRE appropriate to the reality of Catholic schools in Ireland today. Once developed, SCRE needs to be resourced and supported to meet these indicators.

Recommendation 3: A model of oversight of RE needs to be developed, supported and implemented as a matter of urgency. The indicators of RE at primary level and development of a similar set at second level might be helpful in this regard, with evaluation and support of RE to meet these indicators. However, both sets need to be resourced and implemented so that oversight of RE can occur in a clear, transparent and effective way.

Although the findings presented in this report could be informative for school patrons, policymakers, researchers, school leaders, RE teachers, and students and their parents, some limitations should be outlined. Firstly, the study at second level focused on SCRE rather than Junior Cycle Religious Education (JCRE). The experience of stakeholders in Catholic schools of the State-sponsored approach to RE at Junior Cycle, how/if JCRE is adapted for Catholic schools, and how/if it upholds the ethos of the school, is an area for further research. Finally, the data pertain to the perspectives of RE teachers, school staff, principals, deputy principals and BoM members. The voices of both students and their parents regarding RE would add to this field of research. These limitations should be addressed in future reports and research papers.



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