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## Does Religious Education in Catholic schools in the Republic of Ireland have a future?

--Manuscript Draft--

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## Introduction

The teaching and learning of Religious Education (RE) in schools in the Republic of Ireland (henceforth, Ireland) is a matter for the patron delegated to the Board of Management (BoM) (Government of Ireland, 1998). Section 30 of the *Education Act 1998* provides for the right of patrons to design an RE curriculum for their schools. This Act also confers on patrons the legal right and responsibility to uphold the characteristic spirit of the school (Government of Ireland, 1998). RE can be one (among many) expressions of that characteristic spirit, giving parents and children the right to expect RE in accordance with school ethos.

At the same time, reflective of similar international patterns, Catholic education in Ireland finds itself in a detraditionalised cultural context (Boeve, 2007). The Irish religious landscape is changing. Census data reveal that the percentage of those who identify as Catholic is in steady decline, while the proportion of those with no religion continues to rise (CSO, 2016, 2022). Christian religious practice in Ireland is also decreasing, especially among young people (cf. Meehan and Laffan, 2021). At the same time, 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 (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) 2017, p. 28–31). Smyth et al. (2016) found that children are generally positive about the religious and moral education (RME) they receive, regardless of the specific form it took. They like much of the content of the course (especially the 'stories') as well as the more active teaching methodology generally used in RME class.

Cognisant of this reality, the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference (ICBC) upholds RE as a manifestation of school ethos and a means towards realising their vision of Catholic education as open and inclusive of all students regardless of religious perspective. RE should demonstrate a realistic understanding of the needs of young people and 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). They set out their overarching vision for RE in Catholic schools in Ireland in two key documents as follows:

*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. 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 – The National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland* (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 (Irish Episcopal Conference (IEC), 2010, p. 58). Although it can contribute towards faith development, RE is distinct from catechesis (education into the Christian faith and community) (52). 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 (p. 57–58). At the same time, 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). In short, both *Vision 08* and SGN propose RE as essential to holistic education and human development and integral to the curriculum in Catholic schools. As such, it should be properly resourced, specifically with regard to time and approved programmes

## Religious Education and Catholic Primary Schools

In Ireland today, 89% of primary schools have a Catholic patron (usually the bishop of the local diocese). The state sponsored *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). However, under the Framework, the RE time allocation of 2.5 hours per week secured by the Primary Curriculum of 1999 decreases to 2 hours per week for a Patron’s Programme. In Catholic schools, the Patron’s Programme continues to take 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 both 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), and lifts up the call to love one’s neighbour and care for creation. Mirroring SGN, CPPREC is clear that RE is complementary but distinct from catechesis, which specifically seeks to bring Christian people to a ‘maturity of faith’ (IEC, 2010, p. 59). Whereas catechesis can occur as part of RE, for instance in sacramental preparation, the educational learning objectives of CPPREC are inclusive of all children.

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). Echoing the key ecclesial documents outlined above, CPPREC is clear in this regard: faith should never be imposed or coerced. The approach to RE is always invitational: ‘no pupil need receive or be present at, any religious education of which her or his parents or guardians disapprove’ (IEC, 2010, p. 144).

Commissioned by the IEC to support the implementation of CPPREC, *Grow in Love* is the RE programme for Catholic primary schools. 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).

It is important to note that prior to *Share the Good News – The National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland* (SGN) (Irish Episcopal Conference (IEC), 2010) and the subsequent *Catholic preschool and primary religious education curriculum for Ireland* (CPPREC) (IEC, 2015), RE in Catholic primary schools was largely confessional in character. These developments ushered in a new, inclusive approach to RE reflected in the *Grow in Love* programme which is open to all students and cognisant of the emerging diversity referred to earlier. However, as sacramental preparation often takes place during timetabled RE, a tension between the confessional and inclusive approaches can occur.

The position of the ICBC on RE in Catholic primary schools is outlined in *Understanding and living the ethos in a Catholic primary school: a process centred on conversations* (CSP, 2019, p. 17–21). This document highlights RE as one of five key expressions of ethos and an integral part of the life of the school. The RE programme should include 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). A key indicator is that 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.

## **Religious Education and Catholic Second Level Schools**

In Ireland, during the first three years of second level school, students aged 12-15 approximately follow the Junior Cycle. Students then go on to Senior Cycle, which takes two or three years, depending on an optional Transition Year. The Leaving Certificate is the high stakes, state certified, terminal examination which takes place at the end of Senior Cycle.

About 47% of second level schools have a Catholic patron (mostly lay trust bodies), although some joint patronage models exist (Meehan and Laffan, 2021). However, the canonical responsibility for RE remains with the local ordinary. In other words, regardless of Catholic patron, the bishop of every diocese is responsible for the Religious Education of Catholics within that diocese (Catholic Church, 1983, #801–806).

Up until the Education Act of 1998, the Irish state was effectively prohibited in involvement in second level RE. As a result, denominational school patrons filled the gap, leading to a system of denominational confessional RE (religious instruction). The Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) removed this prohibition. Reflecting an international shift (Rymarz, 2012; Stuart-Buttle, 2017), the once dominant denominational and confessional tradition has since given way to an approach led by the state, designed to be inclusive of students of all faith and worldviews. The ICBC has co-operated with the developments in state-sponsored RE since it won status as a state-certified curriculum subject in 2000.

In line with the reform of Junior Cycle (DES, 2015), a specification for Junior Cycle Religious Education (JCRE) (NCCA, 2019) has been incrementally implemented in schools since 2019. Religious Education, intended for all students, whatever their religious faith or worldview,

continues as a state-certified subject. It exposes students 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’ (DES, 2018, p. 2). As a result of this historic evolution, there is no IEC-commissioned RE curriculum or programme for Catholic second level schools (although some Catholic materials are available). Broad guidelines from the Irish Catholic Bishops offer a broad theological framework for adapting the specification for the teaching and learning of JCRE in the Catholic School (Council for Catechetics of the Irish Episcopal Conference, 2019).

## Senior Cycle Religious Education

RE is offered to Senior Cycle students (aged 16-18) in two distinct ways. The first is as a state certified subject for the Leaving Certificate high stakes terminal examination. Students can study it as a subject for the Leaving Certificate examination and follow the comprehensive state sponsored Leaving Certificate Religious Education (LCRE) syllabus (Department of Education and Science, 2003). This way of studying RE is often referred to as ‘exam RE’. Typically, only a small minority of students (c.2%) choose this route. To cater for the religious education of all other Senior Cycle students and to satisfy the patrons’ responsibilities in this regard, a parallel approach to LCRE was developed in the form of a non-formally assessed curriculum framework. Rather than a syllabus, the *Senior Cycle Curriculum Framework* (SCCF hereafter) offers a structure for planning an RE programme for Senior Cycle (NCCA, 2005, p. 151–169). Mirroring the approach taken for both JCRE and LCRE, the SCCF was developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) on behalf of the state, in consultation with various partners including the Catholic community. There is a strong relationship between the SCCF and the syllabus for LCRE. For instance, the common aims of RE include:

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. (NCCA, 2005, p. 152).

In the absence of a SCRE curriculum or programme for Catholic schools, the vast majority of schools and students in this sector adopt the SCCF path. Notably, however, neither the quantity or quality of SCCF RE is assessed either by the state or the patron. *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. Mirroring the indicators at primary level, it advises Catholic schools to integrate RE in the curriculum and to properly allocate resources in order to adequately provide for 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 implementation of JCRE, this study focuses on SCCF Religious Education rather than RE at Junior Cycle.

## Rationale and Aims

This article arises out of a research project conducted by Global Researchers Advancing Catholic Education (GRACE) Ireland entitled *Identity and Ethos in Catholic Primary and*

*Secondary Schools in Ireland, Exploring the Attitudes and Behaviours of Stakeholders* (cf O'Connell et al., 2024; Meehan et al., 2024). This project aims to establish a clear baseline and a set of signposts for the advancing of Catholic education at primary and second levels. Giving voice to stakeholders including teachers and leaders in order to understand their views and experiences, and ensuing implications for Religious Education, is a specific focus of this paper. Findings at primary level are somewhat paradoxical: although evidence of a level of goodwill and appreciation for RE among principals and teachers emerged from the data, school practice routinely falls short of episcopal requirements. At second level, findings indicate a profound concern for Senior Cycle Religious Education (SCRE). With qualitative data uncovering a lack of standards, lack of support and lack of oversight, the future of SCRE in particular looks perilous.

The findings of this study suggest implications for Religious Education in Catholic schools in Ireland that resonate with many themes in this Special Issue, particularly the need for new approaches to support and oversight.

## **Methodology**

This mixed-methods study employed an explanatory sequential design. The first step involved gathering a large body of quantitative data 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, uncover how the qualitative findings help explain the quantitative results, and enhance integration (Creswell, 2022). The semi structured interviews took place within a phenomenological paradigm. It seeks the individual's perceptions and meaning of a phenomenon or experience (Wertz 2005), in this case, Catholic education. The intent is to 'understand and describe an event from the point of view of the participant' (Mertens 2020, p.255).

Ethical permission was granted through Mary Immaculate College Ethics Committee, with the reference code A21-030. Permission was granted November 2021.

Survey questionnaires were distributed to

a) four groups of primary school stakeholders as follows: members of BoMs, principals (including deputy principals), teachers, and other school staff (including ancillary, support, and administrative staff). RE teachers are not part of this cohort as RE in primary schools is taught by the class teacher rather than RE-specific teachers (see Table 1 below).

b) four groups of secondary school stakeholders as follows: members of BoMs, 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
Member of the Board of Management	1,162	95	1,257
Principal or Deputy Principal	1,111	117	1,228
Teacher - Classroom or Subject	794	302	1,096
RE Teacher		129	129
Other Staff	122	74	196
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,189</b>	<b>717</b>	<b>3,906</b>

The questionnaire closed by inviting respondents to self-select for follow-up interviews by inserting their email address. Respondents were assured that this information would be decoupled from their survey responses to protect anonymity. Following this, 52 interviews were conducted, 28 at primary level and 24 at second level (see Table 2 below). Survey data were collated and analysed thematically by means of frequency tables and cross tabulations. Qualitative data were analysed thematically using NVivo software (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

*Table 2 Interview cohorts by number*

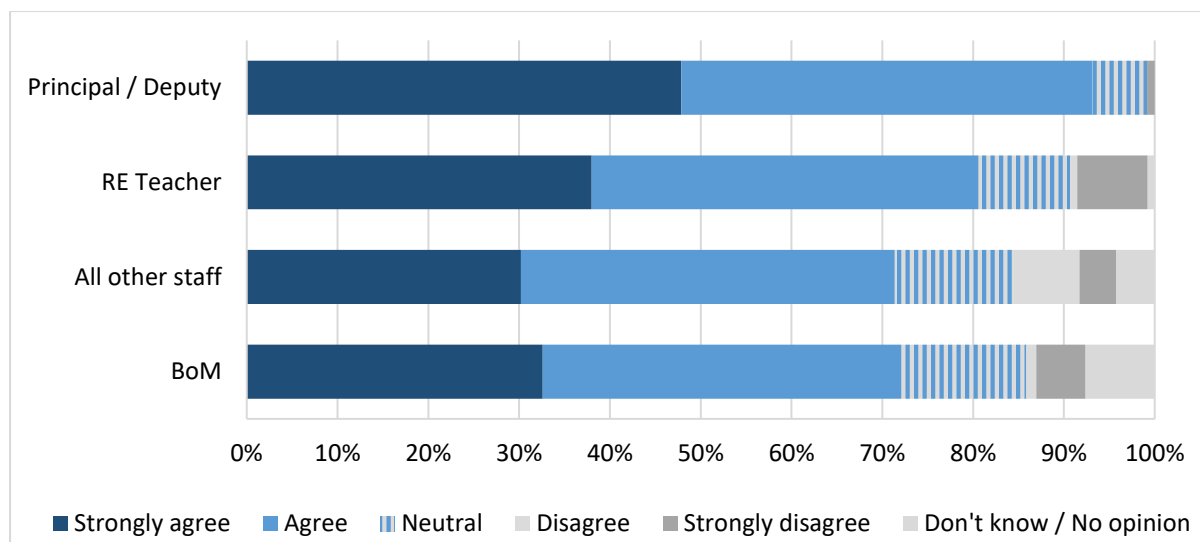
Primary		Secondary	
Board of Management	7	Board of Management	6
Principals	8	Principals/Deputy Principals	6
Teachers	12	RE Teachers	6
Other staff	1	Teaching Staff	6

Limitations to the method include the focus at second level on SCRE rather than Junior Cycle Religious Education (JCRE). How the state-sponsored Junior Cycle Religious Education (JCRE) specification is interpreted and adapted in Catholic schools, and how it upholds the ethos of the school, warrants further research. Second, the data pertain to the perspectives of RE teachers, school staff, principals, deputy principals and BoM members. Whereas this focus yielded rich and substantial data, it is also a limitation. The perspectives on RE of both students and their parents would add depth and breadth to this field of research.

### **Findings: RE at Primary Level**

At first glance, the findings regarding RE in primary schools look reassuring for the Catholic community. 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 1 represents, 71% 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’.

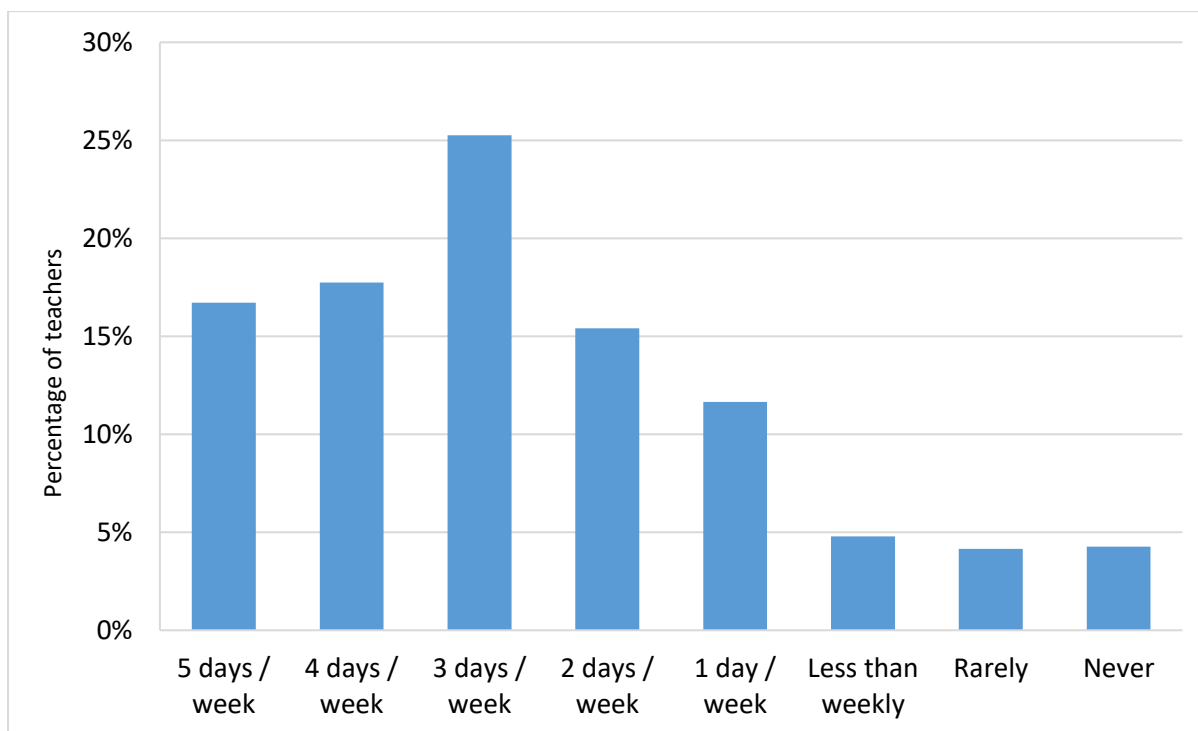
Figure 1: *Extent to which respondents agree or disagree with the statement that ‘pupils of faiths other than Christian, and those of humanist and secular beliefs, have the freedom to express their beliefs in this school’*



Qualitative data reveal 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’. Nonetheless, the data indicate a commitment to inclusion, particularly of children of other faiths and worldviews. This 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).

On the other hand, data from teachers reveal that 33% of them follow the curriculum and textbooks approved by the ICBC only to some/a limited extent, and 5% not at all. Moreover, as Figure 2 illustrates, the findings indicate that just 17% of teachers teach RE every day, 25% on three days, and 40% twice a week or less.

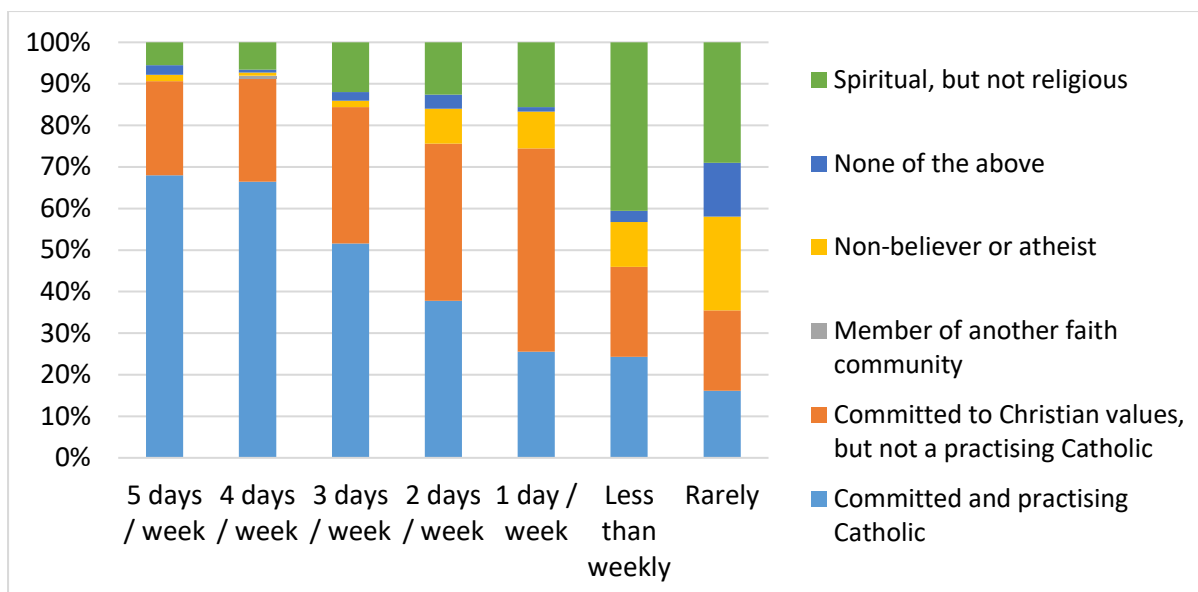
Figure 2: *Frequency with which RE is taught as reported by primary teachers*



The modal figure (25%) indicates that RE is most commonly taught three days a week. This is confirmed by the qualitative data, with comments such as ‘nobody does religion for 30 minutes a day’, and ‘three days a week [for RE] is probably accurate’.

At interview stage, principals proposed 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 ‘teachers don’t believe what they are teaching, so it’s an exercise in futility to do something that’s just not there’. 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’. This is supported by the survey results which found a direct relationship between the commitment and practice of the Catholic faith among teachers and the frequency with which they teach RE (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: *Relationship between amount of time given to teaching RE and religious identity*



As Figure 3 shows, committed and practising Catholics are most likely to teach RE the required 5 days/week. Those who identify as spiritual but not religious are most likely to teach RE less than weekly. 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.’

Time pressures and an overloaded curriculum formed the second reason, with comments such as: ‘the day when we taught every subject every day is disappearing’. Data suggest a concern shared by leaders and teachers that RE will be further pushed aside with the implementation of the new Framework, which introduces new initiatives such as a European language. This frustration with an overloaded curriculum did not translate into an unwillingness to teach RE. Indeed, 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. The qualitative data support this, with evidence of 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 talk about the work of programmes like the Lenten campaign and help children to see that others are less well off.’

The qualitative data suggest that where RE is being taught, it is taught well. Instances 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.’

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’.

The third reason advanced by principals to explain why a sizeable proportion of teachers are not meeting the RE requirements is lack of external support and oversight of RE. A strong demand emerged for external oversight of RE and for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for teachers. 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’. Any support/oversight model needs to be careful and collaborative: ‘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.’

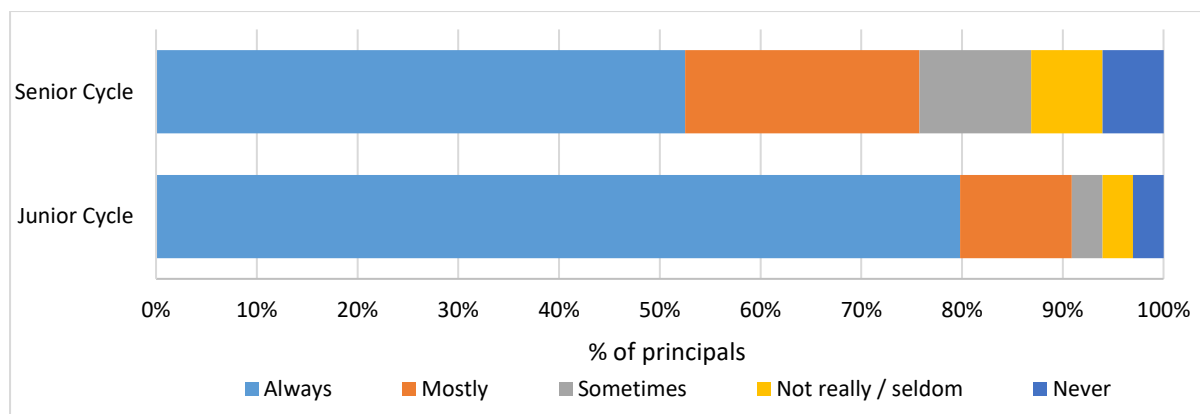
The need for CPD for teachers that goes beyond curricular/programme support also emerged from the findings, for instance, ‘something in the spiritual realm is most needed [for teachers]. Gathering to tease out scripture and get into the depths of our relationship with God and who God is for us, because if we’re vocationally not there, then it’s very dry.’

To conclude, key findings suggest a patchy rather than systemic approach to RE provision across the primary school sector, much of it less than what is required by the patron. Reasons for this are many and complex, including no systematic method of evaluation and improvement, and little accountability or CPD for RE. All cohorts expressed the need for meaningful support. The key indicator that 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 is not met in any systematic way. On the other hand, Catholic primary schools are places where children of other faiths and worldviews can express their religious beliefs and, to a lesser extent, practise them.

## **Findings: RE at Second Level**

The dominant findings about Senior Cycle Curriculum Framework (SCCF) Religious Education, which was the focus of this paper, was significant concern around negative attitudes, poor practice, and lack of support for RE. As Figure 4 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.

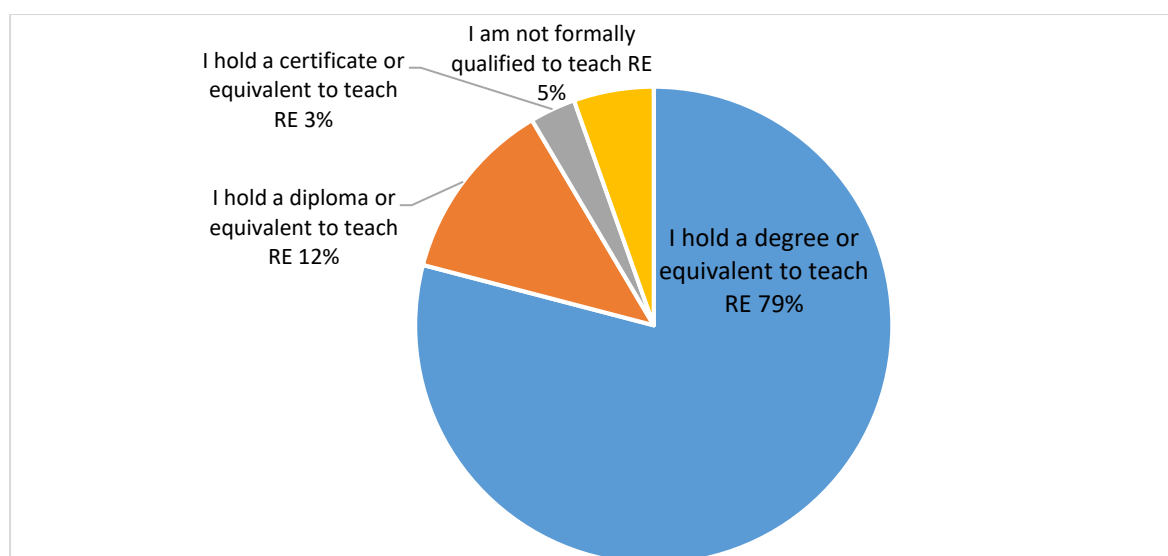
Figure 4: *Frequency with which allocate at least two hours per week to RE, by cycle*



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. For instance, participants described how RE teachers decide on modules and content based on their own interests rather than the SCCF. One teacher illustrated how ‘essentially each teacher can do their own thing and there’s not a whole lot you could really do about that.’ A second lamented ‘anything can be put into the RE class’.

This is not explained by the lack of qualified teachers: as Figure 5 illustrates, almost 80 per cent of those teaching RE hold a degree-level qualification or equivalent.

Figure 5: *RE Teachers’ qualifications*



Teachers report that students are routinely withdrawn from RE for non-RE-related activities, with comments such as:

- ‘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 not a lot you can do about that.’
- ‘[Other teachers say] “I’ll take you for your Irish or French or Spanish oral during [RE] class because that’s not an exam subject’.

At the same time, pockets of evidence emerged of well-taught, well-supported SCRE. This was most likely to occur in schools where RE is valued and supported by senior management,

- ‘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.’

Some teachers advised that, whereas teaching RE at Senior Cycle may not be easy, with effort in planning and methodological approaches, ‘RE is very beneficial to the students, and you get an awful lot more out of them’. 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. This can lead to positive experiences not just for students but for the larger school community.

Even more so than 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. In over 80% 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.

### **Oversight of RE**

There was almost universal agreement that with support and oversight from the patron and trustees, RE could thrive and make a positive impact on the lives of students and the school community only. Participants across cohorts lamented the lack of oversight of RE from any source and that there is no accountability at a formal level. ‘Evaluation and subsequent feedback could play an effective role with teachers who are ‘not connecting with the students or who are watching videos’.

Whereas Participants identified quality control of RE as a priority for patrons and trusts, they were wary about the type of oversight. Comments include

- ‘The Trust has got to be a little bit more critical of the Religious Education that is being taught in their schools.’
- ‘... if someone did not have an open mind as to the existence of religion in the students’ lives, I think [they] could be at loggerheads. I think if someone was there with a clipboard, seeing if I was meeting the standards, I would resist that.’
- Whereas ‘the patron or the Church [should] give direction, 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’. In short, there was almost universal agreement that some type of inspection/evaluation has a role to play in improving standards in SCCF 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 to that. So, from

that perspective, I think evaluation would work. But there needs to be a consistent basis for months to work off beforehand.

To conclude, the overall sense from the data was that SCORE is directionless, increasingly devalued, and very much in need of support and oversight. However, this shared concern did not translate into indifference or resignation about the future of SCORE. Rather, the data suggest that where RE is supported inside and outside the classroom, it can add to the life of the school in valued ways, and a willingness to address the issue.

## Discussion

The findings outlined in this report pose questions for the future of RE in Catholic schools in Ireland. Teachers of RE at primary and secondary level share a similar concern for the inclusion of children of other faiths and worldviews. The evidence which emerged from this study resonates with 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). Moreover, it reflects the vision for RE in Catholic schools outlined by the ICBC as inclusive of all students, regardless of religious perspective (cf. IEC, 2010, pps. 57-58). This bodes well for the future of RE as traditional demographics change and Catholic schools become host to more diverse populations.

In both sectors, there is some evidence of good practice and commitment to RE. This is particularly true of the primary sector, where consistent use of *Grow in Love*, prayer, celebration of religious events, liturgy, and social justice projects like the Lenten campaign are features. In these instances, RE forms an important part of the curriculum and contributes to the ICBC holistic view of education (ICBC, 2008; IEC, 2010).

However, it is clear that the Catholic patron requirements for instance that the RE programme receives its allotted time every week and the school follows the curriculum and textbooks approved by the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference, are met only to some extent. For instance, one third of teachers follow the curriculum and *Grow in Love* textbooks approved by the ICBC only to some/a limited extent, and 5% not at all. Over 80% of primary schools are not meeting the time requirements for RE. The issue of time for RE was particularly acute at second level. Furthermore, serious concern for the quality and standard of RE at Senior Cycle was an almost universal theme among second level participants, despite the evidence that the vast majority of SCORE teachers hold a qualification to teach the subject.

Two clear reasons emerge for this impoverished provision of RE across sectors. The first is lack of personal religious faith and/or disconnect between personally held beliefs and the Catholic tradition (see Figure 3). Comments which refer to lack of belief/theological understanding among teachers such as ‘teachers don’t believe what they are teaching’ resonate with the findings from a recent study of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) students (O’Connell et al., 2023). This study found that while belief in God and the importance of God in their lives is still remarkably high among ITE students, the disconnect between their beliefs and the Catholic tradition is significant. While most students profess some of the core religious beliefs that cohere with Catholic school identity and the RE programme thereof, significant knowledge/understanding gaps are evident. This apparent paradox is reflected in research conducted during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic which indicates that many people see themselves as having become more reflective, more prayerful and closer to God.



One result of the pandemic is that people seem to be asking questions such as What is really important? What gives us meaning and purpose? (Byrne & Sweetman, 2020)? This reflective attitude is reflected in the findings. In the detraditionalized Irish context, where opportunities for people to talk about religion or faith are limited, providing support for teachers of RE in sustained and life-giving ways is important. Regional, highly trained specialists coordinating the service of ongoing, high-quality CPD is one possible approach (Sexton and McCormack, 2021).

Lack of support and oversight emerged as a second reason for the failure to meet RE requirements. Despite the clarity in the episcopal documents that RE requires support for staff, principals, pupils, parents and members of BoMs ‘in opening their hearts and minds to the presence of God’ (CSP, 2019 p. 19), participants identified support for RE as a subject, and for RE teachers and leaders, as a priority for patrons and trusts. The plight of SCRE as a subject is particularly serious. With no curriculum or programmes for SCRE in Catholic schools, there appears to be little guidance or accountability. Findings at both primary and secondary level reveal that a model of oversight is urgently needed. Whereas the Irish State has a well-developed school inspection system, ranging from assessment of individual subjects to Whole School Evaluation (WSE), neither RE (primary) nor SCCF RE (second level) are part of this system. The Catholic Church in Ireland does not have any systemic means of evaluation,

The state-sponsored school inspection system has demonstrated that schools in Ireland are ready, willing and able to improve when professional structures for evaluation, improvement, and accountability are offered. Dillon (2012) reports that school leaders value the inspection process data and reports and use such professional structures as means of improvement. The model of co-professional evaluation and benchmarks to evaluate evidence has led to joint ventures between the school inspectorate and other groups. For instance, it has collaborated with Teagasc, the agricultural development authority, on quality measures for agricultural colleges (Hislop, 2017). On a much larger scale, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs engaged in a similar collaboration to develop an education-focused inspection of early years’ provision. Similar models internationally have also met with success. For instance, England 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 to evaluate and improve RE.

## Conclusion

The patronage model of education in Ireland places the right and responsibility for RE in the hands of the school patron. At one level, Catholic school patrons can be reassured by the level of commitment and professionalism among stakeholders and the good practice and commitment to the subject, particularly at primary 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. In fact, the findings undermine the vision of RE in the ecclesial documents as essential to holistic education and integral to the curriculum, and destabilise the proposed pedagogy which should help pupils to grow in self-understanding, to express the search for meaning, and to develop their relationship with God,

1 however (and if) they conceive God to be (ICBC, 2008). With no programme or benchmarks,  
2 successful teaching and learning of SCRE is of particular concern. Serious implications arise  
3 for schools that claim to be Catholic and for families who expect these schools to provide a  
4 religious education for their children.

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6 The findings at primary level demonstrate that good RE goes beyond programme  
7 development. Resourcing and support of teachers is also a necessity. Providing ongoing,  
8 high-quality CPD for teachers in sustained and life-giving ways is an important first step. A  
9 second step is the development and implementation of an evaluation system for the teaching  
10 and learning of RE, perhaps through a collaborative model with the state inspectorate. Any  
11 such model needs to be developed and implemented in consultation with teachers and leaders.  
12 It also needs to be resourced and implemented so that oversight of RE is clear, transparent  
13 and effective.  
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17 The findings presented in this report could be informative for school patrons, policymakers,  
18 leaders, teachers, students and their parents, At the same time, the gaps which emerge from  
19 this study might be of interest to future research. For instance, the study at second level  
20 focused on SCRE; how the state-sponsored Junior Cycle Religious Education (JCRE)  
21 specification is interpreted and adapted in Catholic schools, and how it upholds the ethos of  
22 the school, is an area for further research.  
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