# Current Practices in Religious Education in Catholic Primary Schools: Perspectives of Principals

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**Declaration**

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

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| | |
|---|---|
| **BoM** | Board of Management |
| **CEP** | Catholic Education Partnership |
| **CPD** | Continuing Professional Development |
| **CSP** | Catholic Schools Partnership |
| **CPSMA** | Catholic Primary Schools Management Association |
| **DA** | Diocesan Advisor |
| **DE** | Department of Education 1924 to 1997 |
| **DES** | Department of Education and Science 1997 to 2010 |
| **DES** | Department of Education and Skills 2010 to 2020 |
| **DE** | Department of Education 2020 to 2025 |
| **GRACE** | Global Researchers Advancing Catholic Education |
| **ICBC** | Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference |
| **IEC** | Irish Episcopal Conference |
| **INTO** | Irish National Teachers Organisation |
| **NCCA** | National Council for Curriculum and Assessment |
| **RE** | Religious Education |
| **SGN** | Share the Good News |

**Abstract**

# Current Practices in Religious Education in Catholic Primary Schools: Perspectives of Principals

**Miriam McCabe**

The *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023), published by the Department of Education, has resulted in changes to the treatment of Religious Education (RE) in the primary curriculum in the Republic of Ireland. RE is renamed as the Religious/Ethical/Multi-belief, and Values Education – The Patron's Programme and the time allocated to teaching RE is reduced. This raises questions around how these changes will impact RE in Catholic primary schools, where RE is central to the school's ethos and identity.

This study investigates the perspectives of principals in Catholic primary schools regarding the importance, practices, and future of RE within the context of these curriculum developments. Drawing on interviews with ten principals, it explores their views on the importance of RE in their schools, their experiences with current RE practices, and their perceptions of how the *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023), may impact these practices. By gathering principals' insights, this research endeavours to provide an understanding of the current and future role of RE in Catholic primary education. Principals acknowledge RE's importance in fostering holistic education and ethos but admit that they face challenges such as a lack of oversight, outdated policies, and limited support. The study identifies significant gaps in continuous professional development opportunities for teachers and principals, challenges in communication between Patrons and schools, and the impact of increased diversity in classrooms. The research highlights the need for enhanced support systems, including targeted professional development, clear accountability structures, and improved channels of communication between Patrons and schools. By addressing these gaps, RE can be repositioned as a key component of Catholic education, contributing to the holistic development of pupils and sustaining the ethos of a Catholic primary school. The study contributes to the discourse on RE in Ireland, offering practical considerations for enhancing its role and effectiveness in Catholic primary schools.

# Chapter I: Introduction and Rationale

## 1.1 Introduction

The *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* was published by the Department of Education (henceforth DE) in 2023. This document resulted from many years of deliberation and consultation by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (henceforth NCCA). It sees the emergence of notable changes regarding Religious Education (henceforth RE) and its place in the primary curriculum in the Republic of Ireland (henceforth Ireland). How these changes will impact RE in Catholic primary schools is unknown. This research aims to investigate the practice of RE in Catholic primary schools, aspiring to understand the potential effect of recent developments. This study centres on gathering primary school principals' subjective views and opinions, who play a crucial role in integrating and promoting RE as a core component of the school's ethos. The study focuses attention on three main areas of investigation:

- Principals' views on the importance of the subject of RE in their schools.
- Principals' experiences of current practices around RE in their schools and their perception of the factors that influence those practices.
- How principals perceive recent developments in the primary curriculum impacting the practices of RE in their schools.

A Catholic primary school is distinct because 'its concept of the human person is rooted in the teaching of Jesus Christ as embodied in the Catholic faith community' (CSP, 2019, p.8). In Catholic primary schools, RE is not merely another subject in the curriculum; it is integral to the school's Catholic ethos and is provided as a core aspect of the ethos of the school.

Investigating principals' perspectives on RE helps to illustrate how RE contributes to the school's Catholic identity. By exploring their views, experiences, and perceptions, the research can provide valuable insights into how RE is integrated into school life, the challenges and supports involved, and the impact of recent developments.

## 1.2 Rationale

The rationale for undertaking this particular research around RE lies in the treatment of RE within the *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023). In this document, RE is presented as less central to the curriculum than in the previous *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999) through a reduction in time allocation and a renaming of RE to the Patron's Programme. RE was previously allocated two and a half hours per week in all classes. It is now allocated one hour and forty minutes in junior classes and two hours in senior classes. In the *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023), the term "Religious Education' is changed to 'Patron's Programme'. The change reflects the increased variety of school types in Ireland today. It seeks to be more inclusive, recognising that there are a number of Patron's programmes which demonstrate the variety of patronage. The Patron of a school has 'a legal right to design their own programme in accordance with the ethos of their school' (DE, 2023, p.14). Some programmes are religious, 'emphasising the place of children's faith, spiritual and moral development' (DE, 2023, p.19). Other programmes are described as ethical or multi-faith (DE, 2023).

The motivation for this study is rooted in the researcher's experiences as a Catholic primary school principal and the Catholic Primary School Management Association (henceforth CPSMA) representative on the NCCA Board for Early Childhood and Primary. CPSMA supports chairpersons and principals in Catholic primary schools on various issues from ethos to management. It also consults with the DE and other stakeholders in education on behalf of Catholic primary Schools. The NCCA Board for Early Childhood and Primary is tasked with developing a revised primary curriculum framework and specifications for each subject area. The board has twenty-two members, including representatives from the Department of Education, patron bodies, teacher unions, Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, the National Council for Special Education, and the National Parents Council and Oide, the government-sponsored support service for teachers and school leaders. From 2017 to 2020, the NCCA developed the now-published *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023). While attending the NCCA curriculum redevelopment meetings, it became evident that there was a lack of awareness regarding the value of RE as part of a primary curriculum and the potential consequences its diminishment could have on the ethos and Catholic identity of Catholic primary schools. My

involvement in Catholic education spans over 30 years, including my principal role in two Catholic primary schools, where I have had consistently positive experiences. This combination of professional experience and observations at the NCCA meetings prompted me to question whether other principals in Catholic primary schools shared my concerns or believed it was appropriate to remove RE from the core curriculum.

There is a dearth of literature addressing the perspectives and experiences of principals concerning the importance of RE. A document which greatly influenced the development of the *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023) was the *Primary Developments: Consultation on Curriculum Structure and Time, Final Report* (NCCA, 2018). This document was the result of consultations with various stakeholders in education. An online questionnaire open to educators yielded 2084 responses; however, the report states that respondents tended to be early to mid-career teachers. During the focus group phase of the consultation process, only 48 teachers and principals participated. This is a low figure when considering the number of teachers and principals in the primary education system. There appears to be a lack of direct engagement with principals who are leaders of teaching and learning in their schools. This gap in research highlighted the need to explore the views and experiences of these educational leaders regarding RE in practice in Catholic primary schools.

Before delving into recent curriculum policy development and RE in Ireland, it is important first to examine the historical and cultural context that shaped the role of RE in earlier Irish curricula. This will provide insight into the historical significance of RE within the educational landscape.

### 1.3 The historical evolution of primary education in Ireland – a brief look back

A historical context is vital for understanding the current dynamics of religion and education in Ireland. To fully understand the current context for education at primary level, the prevalence of Catholic patronage and the place of RE in the curriculum today, it is necessary to examine the evolution of primary education in Ireland and the role played by the Catholic Church and state in that journey (Renehan & Williams, 2015). Primary education in Ireland is inextricably linked with religion because of their shared history (Kieran & Hession, 2005).

Looking first to the seventeenth and eighteenth Centuries, the literature which examines this period of Irish history indicates that the British state endeavoured to control the people of Ireland (Akenson, 1970; Coolahan, 1981; O'Riordan, 1983; Kieran, 2005; Walsh, 2016). The Penal Laws were introduced in Britain and Ireland in 1695 and marked the beginning of nearly a Century of systematic and continuously developed laws. These laws were intended to suppress all religious, cultural and political activities of those outside the established church (Kieran & Hession, 2005; O'Donoghue & Harford, 2011). However, such enforced dominance resulted in tremendous resistance and a strengthening of loyalty to Catholicism (Kieran & Hession, 2005).

In 1831, the British authorities sought the establishment of an education system that would unite children of different creeds (Coolahan, 1981; Kieran, 2005). In doing so, the authorities hoped to use education as a means of 'civilisation, socialisation, assimilation, politicisation and the reproduction of colonial values with a view to making Ireland more governable' (Walsh, 2016, p. 9). The Stanley Letter of 1831, written by the then Chief Secretary for Ireland, Edward Stanley, was to become the founding document for the national school system in Ireland (O'Riordan, 1983). The Stanley letter outlined principles that formed the basis for the formation of the National Board of Education. One core principle saw the proposal of mixed education whereby an interdenominational system includes integrated secular lessons with separate denominational religious lessons for students.

The Board of Education was subsequently established in 1831 to oversee the management of state funds for education in Ireland. The central government provided financial support, while autonomy for the school's management was vested locally. (Coolahan, 1981) A local bishop or clergy member could apply to become Patron of the school, and these Patrons provided school buildings and property at a local level. This resulted in the manager, who was usually a Patron representative, having responsibility for the general running of the school (O'Riordan, 1983). In this way, the Catholic Church positioned itself as integral to the new national school system (Walsh, 2016). Over the ensuing 30 years, the system became predominantly denominational due to the influence of the different church bodies (Walsh, 2016: Coolahan, 1981). While happy to take advantage of state funding, each denomination wanted to ensure a system that reflected their particular denominational requirements (Coolahan, 1981; O'Riordan, 1983; Walsh, 2016). As a result, in the case of Catholic primary schools, the 1850s saw Catholic children attending schools managed

locally, usually by the parish priest, on behalf of the Patron, the Bishop of the area (Walsh, 2016). Indeed, the legacy of policy and legislation in education from this period is still evident today in the high number of existing denominational primary schools (Raftery, 2009), with figures showing 88.9% of schools under the patronage of the Catholic Church (DE, 2022).

At the time of the setting up of the Free State in 1922, religion and cultural identity were closely linked (Coolahan,1981). As a result of the Catholic Church's role in providing education prior to independence, the newly established Department of Education included a vital element of Catholic Church representation at the highest levels (O'Donoghue & Harford, 2011). Consequently, the primary and second-level curriculum reflected a strong Catholic religious ethos. The Catholic Church heavily influenced the Irish Constitution of 1937, and this seminal document incorporated many Catholic principles (Lumby & Mac Ruairc, 2018). By 1965, 3,789 Catholic primary schools had opened (O'Donoghue & Harford, 2011). Through the Catholic Church's influence, RE was made available in these primary schools. This resulted in RE at primary level being 'positioned exclusively within a denominational and overwhelmingly Christian framework (Kieran & Mullally, 2021, p.2). In 1965, the *Rules for National Schools* were published. Rule 68 articulated a central role afforded to teaching religion, describing RE as a fundamental part of the curriculum (DE, 1965). *Curaclam na bunscoile* was published in 1971 and integrated RE across other subject areas. This meant that RE, as with other subject areas, was not restricted to RE classes but integrated with other subjects throughout the day (Rougier & Honohan, 2015). The establishment of the Dalkey School Project in 1978 marked a significant milestone in Irish primary education as it pioneered the country's first multi-denominational national school since 1922, responding to the dominance of religious control by offering parents an alternative to the existing religious-based education system.

An unparalleled degree of policy analysis took place from 1990 to 1999, which resulted in a great deal of education-related legislation (O'Donoghue & Harford, 2011). The revised *Primary School Curriculum* (DE, 1999) was published in 1999. This was the culmination of many years of development and planning, encompassing many stakeholders (Walsh, 2016). It was considered 'a significant departure in the history of primary education in Ireland' (DES, 1999, p.2). In replacing the 1971 Curriculum, the revised *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999) grew from the thinking espoused by the National Convention on Education, 1994, in *Charting our Educational Future* –

*White Paper on Education* (DES,1995) and the *Education Act, 1998*. Its introduction explains its origin in the recommendations of the Review Body on the Primary Curriculum (1990). It claimed to reflect the most innovative and effective pedagogical practice (DES, 1999), and it was considered cutting-edge at the time (NCCA, 2020).

This brief look back at the historical development of primary education in Ireland reveals a deeply rooted and complex relationship between religion and education. The Catholic Church played a foundational role in shaping the education system and as Ireland continues to develop a more inclusive and diverse educational landscape, understanding this shared history is essential in informing current policy and practice. In the recently published *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023, p.3), the introduction states that 'a curriculum reflects educational priorities which society, at a point in time, deems vital for its young citizens'. However, RE, entitled Religion/Ethical/Multi-belief and Values Education – The Patron's Programme in this document, appears to be marginalised from the core curriculum and consigned to the periphery alongside roll call and break times (DE, 2023). The Patron of the school is responsible for the advancement of the ethos of the school. An essential aspect of promoting the school ethos is delivering the programme specifically developed by the individual Patron. In stark contrast to the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999), RE appears to be considered separate from the core curriculum. Such a move 'undermines the role of Religious Education in an integrated curriculum and life of a Catholic school' (Meehan & O'Connell, 2021, p.5). Curriculum focus has moved considerably from having RE at its heart to relegating it to the sidelines.

### 1.4 Background to the study

Ireland has a primary education system in which almost 90% of schools are governed by religious patronage (Renehan & Williams, 2015; Byrne & Devine, 2017). According to statistics published by the DE in 2024, 88.9% of primary pupils attend Catholic primary schools in Ireland, and there are 2,379 Catholic primary schools. These schools are state funded for the most part; however, they are managed locally by a board of management on behalf of the Patron, who, in the case of Catholic schools, is usually the bishop of the diocese[1]. While the statistics confirm the dominance

[1] Ireland is divided geographically into 26 dioceses. Each diocese is led by a bishop who oversees parishes, clergy, education, and pastoral care.

of Catholic patronage, they do not accurately reflect where the authority lies at the primary level (Tiernan & McGraw, 2022). The Catholic Church retains control over school property, RE, school governance, and the maintenance of the school ethos in Catholic primary schools. However, the DE has acquired control over other critical areas such as admissions, curricular development, operational management and school inspections.

Schools with a Catholic ethos have a rich tradition in education within the primary school, which is considered an extension of the local parish community (CSP, 2019). In more recent decades, Irish society has undergone an exceptionally dramatic period of change (Faas et al., 2016). The educational landscape has witnessed change and development during this time. Faas et al. (2016) describe modern Ireland as a multi-ethnic and multi-faith society. The demographic of the population in Ireland has changed and a growing diversity has resulted in social change (Darmody & Smyth, 2018). Education is still seen as central to Ireland's economic, social and cultural development (DES, 2011). The high level of public interest in education has resulted in successive governments recognising and acting on their role in national planning strategies. Despite the state taking a more significant role in educational provision and despite much political and public debate around school patronage, the vast majority of primary schools remain under the patronage of the Catholic Church. It is argued that there is a mismatch in Ireland where an increasingly diverse population is not catered to by the predominantly denominational primary school system (Tiernan & McGraw, 2022; Faas et al., 2020).

A key expression of the ethos in a Catholic school is the provision of RE. For the purpose of this research, the aim of RE in Catholic primary schools as set out in the *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland* (henceforth *CPPRECI,* 2015) is adopted. It defines that the aim of RE is 'to help children mature in relation to their spiritual, moral, and religious lives, through their encounter with, exploration of, and celebration of the Catholic faith' (IEC, 2015, p.31). This definition underscores the multifaceted role of RE in fostering holistic development that aligns with the ethos of a Catholic school. RE in Catholic primary schools promotes inclusion and the teaching of 'tolerance and respect for others and for diversity' (O'Loan, 2013, p.49). The principal ensures a 'consistent and coordinated approach to religious education, appropriate to the school ethos' (IEC, 2010, p.146). According to Byrne and Devine (2017), principals, through their leadership and management, play a central role in the emphasis and

importance of RE in the school. RE influences a school's religious identity and fosters students' spiritual, moral, and religious development. RE is woven into the fabric of daily school life through liturgical celebrations, prayer, and faith-based activities, reinforcing the religious and spiritual dimensions of education. This interconnectedness ensures that the ethos is not just a theoretical construct but a lived reality that shapes the entire educational experience.

There is considerable literature that speaks to the value of RE (Lumby & MacRuairc, 2021; Drumm, 2012). Through their engagement with RE in Catholic primary schools, pupils 'enhance their spiritual lives, to gain knowledge of Christian beliefs, to develop key skills of religious literacy and to develop positive Christian attitudes and values' (IEC, 2015, p.30). The Catholic primary school is faith-based and provides holistic education for its pupils. As part of that holistic education, RE provides a framework for spiritual, moral and religious growth (Hession, 2015).

Numerous voices call for religious pluralism in education to provide non-discriminatory schools and promote a more diverse educational model (Faas et al., 2016; Doyle et al., 2020). This argument is based on the fact that schools are facing new challenges as a result of growing secularisation coupled with increased migration of people who are culturally and religiously diverse (Faas et al., 2016). However, the narrative which suggests that Catholic primary schools are discriminatory is not always based in fact. For example, on the issue of admissions to schools, the campaign to remove religious affiliation as a requirement for admission to Catholic primary schools coined the phrase 'baptism barrier'. This term implied that pupils who were not Catholic were being discriminated against by being refused enrolment in Catholic primary schools. Research conducted in 2017 by CPSMA debunked this claim by finding that only 1.2% of unsuccessful applicants could attribute their refusal to not having a baptismal cert (Tiernan & McGraw, 2022).

The Catholic Schools Partnership (CSP), established in 2010 by the Irish Catholic Bishop's Conference and the Conference of Religious of Ireland, developed an evaluation process to aid Catholic schools in assessing and articulating their Catholic identity. Revised in 2019, it is now entitled *Understanding and Living the Ethos in a Catholic Primary School, a process centred on conversations* (CSP, 2019, pp. 17-21). This document identifies five characteristics of a Catholic primary school. They are:

1. We are called to be followers of Christ

2. We have a Catholic understanding of education

3. The school is a Christian community

4. The school is an agent of personal growth and social transformation

5. Religious education is an integral part of the life of the school

These characteristics are afforded greater consideration in Chapter 2 of this thesis. At this point, it is sufficient to point out that RE is one of the five key characteristics of Catholic primary schools and, as such, a core element for engaging with and maintaining their ethos. A key instrument in maintaining the religious identity of Catholic primary schools is the value system promoted by the RE programme designed by the school Patron. Education is never a value-neutral endeavour (CSP, 2019; Hession, 2015). Catholic primary schools assert a 'robust spiritual and moral value system' (CSP, 2019, p.8). RE in Catholic primary schools comprises 'an educational dimension and a faith formation dimension' (IEC, 2015, p.13). In Catholic primary schools, *Grow in Love,* a programme published in 2015, is the only programme approved by Catholic patrons to provide RE to pupils.

The *Primary School Curriculum: Introduction* (DES, 1999) sets out a definite rationale for the inclusion of RE in the primary curriculum. It sees RE as an area of the curriculum that enables the child to develop spiritual and moral values and to come to a knowledge of God (DES, 1999, p. 58). This resonates with the Education Act 1998, which directs educators to promote, among other fundamental elements, the moral and spiritual development of the child. The importance of education in spiritual and moral development, and the role of RE in achieving this, is evident from these two seminal documents. However, the *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023) sees a shift in emphasis. Where once RE was presented as an integrated core subject, it is now depicted as separate from the main curriculum areas and subjects. Among other curricular reforms, the *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023) sees the removal of the term Religious Education, replacing it with the title Patrons Programme. It also sees reduced time allocated to teaching RE in primary schools. How these changes will impact the value attributed to RE and current practices in RE remains to be seen.

### 1.5 Rationale for focusing on the views of principals

This research engages with ten principals from Catholic primary schools to elicit their views regarding the importance of RE in a Catholic primary school. The roles and responsibilities assigned to the principal of a primary school concerning the maintenance of the ethos of a school are evident. According to the Irish Episcopal Conference (2010), the ethos of a school should be lived out in the day-to-day running of the school. The Education Act (1998) assigns the daily management of the school to the principal. The Governance Manual for Primary Schools 2023-2027 (DE, 2023) also designates responsibility for the day-to-day management of the school with the principal, which includes guidance and direction of the teachers. Leadership and Management of the primary school are outlined in *Looking at our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools and Special Schools* (henceforth *LAOS*) (DE, 2022). According to this document, school leaders are responsible for 'creating and maintaining a positive school culture' (DE, 2022, p.25). It also identifies the key role assigned to the principal around the leadership of the guiding vision for the school (DE, 2022).

The principal plays a crucial role in promoting the school's vision. Collaborating with the Patron, board of management, and other school leaders, the principal ensures that the guiding vision, which outlines the goals and expectations for the school as a learning community, is effectively communicated to teachers, parents, and pupils (DE, 2018). This clear communication empowers the entire school community to implement the vision. As a result, as described by Khalifa et al. (2016, p. 1274), principals have a "profoundly deep impact" on students and the school environment. Devine (2013) recognised the challenges that can occur due to increasing social change as school leaders endeavour to preserve the ethos of their schools. Faas et al. (2018) highlight the pivotal role demonstrated by leadership on school culture or ethos when responding to social change. The school principal is a core element in a culturally responsive school context which endeavours to maintain an inclusive yet denominational school (Faas et al., 2018).

As leaders of teaching and learning and the person responsible for promoting and maintaining the school's guiding vision, the principal has a pivotal role in embedding RE as a critical practice in maintaining the school's overarching ethos. As such, principals are expected to be well-placed to provide valuable insight regarding current practices in RE. The allocation of resources to the teaching of RE, both financial and time, is predetermined by the principal's attitude towards

religion and faith practices (Byrne & Devine, 2017). The religious identity of a school is impacted by the values that are shared and transmitted among the school community, and central to this is the role played by the principal in influencing the maintenance of school traditions, policies, and general perceptions and attitudes held by those within the community (Wren, 1999). It is widely agreed that the school principal exerts significant influence over the management of the school (Coll, 2009; Boyle, 2016; Branson et al., 2019). Principals are, therefore, central to allocating resources and promoting RE as a key element of maintaining the ethos of Catholic primary schools. Principals are key leaders in schools, shaping and sustaining a school ethos. Their views provide valuable insights into how RE is prioritised and implemented as a core component of the school's ethos. Principals are also well-placed to interpret any implications the proposed changes will have on their ability to provide RE in their schools to maintain their Catholic ethos.

### 1.6 Structure of the Thesis

This opening chapter introduces the study and its research focus. It sets out the rationale behind the study and justifies the focus on principals' views. It concludes with an outline of the thesis's structure.

Chapter 2 provides the contextual framework within which this research is situated. It commences with a precise definition of key concepts and terms central to this thesis, progressing to consideration of the term 'ethos' as it applies to Catholic primary schools. Grounded in existing literature, there is a particular focus on RE and how it supports ethos in Catholic primary schools. A critical component of this exploration is the framework developed by the Catholic Schools Partnership (CSP), Understanding and Living the Ethos in a Catholic School: A Process Centred on Conversations (CSP, 2019). This framework identifies RE as one of the five fundamental characteristics underpinning Catholic primary schools' ethos. The remainder of Chapter 2 examines the literature surrounding curriculum policy development in Ireland and its ramifications for RE at the primary level. This includes an analysis of how macro-level policy development impacts the subject of RE. To situate current policy developments in Ireland within a broader context, the chapter also reviews literature on European perspectives of RE. This comparative analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of the context for the recently published *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023).

Additionally, the chapter investigates the key challenges facing RE in contemporary Catholic primary schools in Ireland. These challenges include evolving attitudes towards RE, increasing diversity within the student population, issues of teacher commitment, curriculum overload, and the availability of professional development opportunities for principals and teachers in Catholic primary schools.

Chapter 3 addresses the research design and methods adopted to examine the research question. Initially, the theoretical foundations behind the chosen methodology are explored. A justification for choosing the interpretive paradigm is presented, followed by a brief review of the philosophical assumptions that relate to this research. The data collection methods, which are adopted in line with the interpretivism paradigm, are outlined.

Chapter 4 presents the findings from the data analysis process under five main themes and thirteen sub-themes.

Chapter 5 draws together the literature from Chapter 2 with the findings presented in Chapter 4 to discuss and analyse current RE practices within the context of a school's Catholic ethos, as perceived by the principals in this study. It considers the factors that influence RE practices while also speculating on what is necessary for the development and success of RE as an aspect of a Catholic primary school's ethos in the future.

Chapter 6 focuses on the implications of this study's findings for the provision of RE in Catholic primary schools and those who lead and support them. It also highlights how Catholic patrons can best support their primary schools during this change and uncertainty.

### 1.7 Conclusion

This research seeks to investigate the practice of RE in Catholic primary schools to understand the potential impact of recent curriculum developments. It will do so by focusing on principals' perspectives around the role of RE as a subject in Catholic primary schools, their experiences of current RE practices, the factors influencing these practices, and their perceptions of how recent curriculum developments impact the practices around RE in their schools. This study aspires to contribute to the broader discourse on RE in Catholic primary education.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

## 2.1 Introduction

This literature review aims to examine the landscape within which this research project is situated. It begins by defining key concepts and terms central to the thesis, addressing the discipline of Religious Education (RE) in the first instance. Literature that speaks to European perspectives on RE is explored so that current policy development in Ireland and the shifting emphasis away from RE can be situated within a broader context. This is followed by an explanation of denominational education and the patronage model in Ireland. Next, the term ethos as it pertains to Catholic primary schools is discussed. Then the literature addressing how RE supports the ethos of Catholic primary schools is explored through the lens of the framework developed by the Catholic Schools Partnership (CSP), *Understanding and Living the Ethos in a Catholic Primary School: A Process Centred on Conversations* (CSP, 2019). This framework situates RE as one of the five characteristics which underpin the Catholic ethos in Catholic primary schools. There is a brief outline of these characteristics with a closer examination of RE as it contributes to the school's ethos.

Chapter 1 briefly examined the historical evolution of primary education in Ireland to contextualise the significance attributed to RE in previous curricula. It explored how the close relationship between Church and State shaped the educational landscape in Ireland, particularly the Catholic Church's foundational role in forming the school system. This historical backdrop helps to explain why RE held a place of prominence in earlier curricula and offers a lens through which to evaluate shifts in the current practices and attitudes toward RE in an increasingly pluralistic society. This chapter goes on to explore developments in the 21st Century which have influenced the educational landscape at primary level. It then examines literature that concerns the key challenges facing RE in Catholic primary schools in contemporary Ireland. This includes the changing attitudes to RE, the impact of growing diversity in the school population, curriculum overload and the availability of professional development for teachers in RE. Next the chapter addresses the literature on curriculum policy development in Ireland and its impact on RE at primary level. It looks at how policy development at the macro level is impacting the subject of RE. Finally, the recently published *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023) is unpacked in light of the context outlined above.

## 2.2 Defining the terms

This section seeks to clarify fundamental areas that are central to this thesis, such as (i) The working definition of Religious Education as it pertains to this research study, (ii) denominational education and the Patron, and (iii) Catholic ethos. These terms will be used throughout this study and must be clarified to provide a foundation for understanding this research study's frame of reference. The significance and implications of these terms in the context of primary education in Ireland will be addressed in subsequent sections of this chapter.

### 2.2.1 Religious Education

One of the most significant challenges in examining the relationship between religion and education is the complexity of language (Renehan, 2014). A nuanced understanding of Religious Education (RE) versus Religious Instruction is essential, as these related terms embody distinct approaches that can be easily conflated, particularly in both Irish and global contexts (McGrady, 2013, p.79). Religious Instruction, as enshrined in the Irish Constitution (Article 44, 1937) and the Rules for National Schools (DE, 1965), refers to the transmission of a single religious tradition. Historically, it was aimed at socialising pupils into the Catholic faith and forming them into practising members of the Catholic Church (Hession, 2015). Although the use of the term has declined, it still retains "legal and constitutional currency" (McGrady, 2013, p.81). It remains closely tied to the historical role of churches in education, particularly in relation to instruction in specific rites, teachings, and practices (Meehan, 2018).

However, the focus of this research project is RE, which transcends the scope of instruction and encompasses a broader and more holistic educational process that not only enhances pupils' understanding of religion but also encourages personal and social transformation (Hession, 2015, p.232). As outlined in Share the Good News: The National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland (IEC, 2010), RE provides opportunities for pupils to develop religious ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, focusing on the spiritual, moral, and transcendent dimensions of life (IEC, 2010, p.57). Therefore, RE is not simply about imparting knowledge; it is an invitation to explore the human religious traditions that illuminate the experience of belief in the divine, ultimately fostering a new way of being and acting (Hession, 2015).

In 2015, the Irish Episcopal Conference published the *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland* (IEC, 2015) (henceforth *CPPRECI*). The first of its kind for

Catholic primary schools in Ireland, this document reflects the shift in emphasis away from Religious Instruction. It demonstrates a change in how RE is conceptualised and implemented in Catholic schools. According to the *CPPRECI* (IEC, 2015), RE in Catholic primary schools expresses two dimensions: the educational dimension and the faith formation dimension. It provides 'formal teaching in matters of belief, values and practice that equip the young child for a free and intelligent expression of personal faith within the family, Church and wider society' (IEC, 2015, p.13). RE is more than just faith formation. Where appropriate, RE in a Catholic primary school endeavours to foster 'an encounter with the person of Jesus' (IEC, 2015, p.134). RE in Catholic primary schools recognises the importance of the child's holistic development, which includes the spiritual and religious dimension of being human (Hession, 2015, p.232). Based on the *CPPRECI* (IEC, 2015), the *Grow in Love* programme was developed to teach RE in Catholic primary schools in Ireland. It is the only programme approved by the IEC. The programme is designed to support academic and formational RE. It provides for structured teaching on Catholic beliefs, values, and practices while also nurturing pupils' faith and enabling them to live out their beliefs in their everyday lives (IEC, 2015, p.13).

Religious Education, however, is not confined to the Irish context alone. Across Europe, RE is shaped by varying cultural, legal, and religious landscapes. While national approaches differ, many countries share similar challenges, such as growing secularisation, changes in religious affiliation, and evolving educational policy, all of which influence the role and nature of RE in schools (Jackson, 2014). These shifts are central to broader societal debates around the relevance and purpose of RE in public education.

The ongoing conversation associated with RE in European schools is multifaceted and reflects the complexities intrinsic to modern societies (Faas et al., 2016). Forefront in such discourses are issues like growing secularisation, pluralism and globalisation. Secularisation, a separation from religious or spiritual matters, is 'characterised by a decline in religious belief and practice within Western societies' (Jackson, 2019, p.5). The pluralisation of society, which is characterised by respect for the religious beliefs of others, has come about through migration, which sees considerable movement of people from various ethnic and religious backgrounds throughout the European states (Jackson, 2013). Globalisation, which describes how the world is more connected and interrelated due to excellent connectivity through modern technologies, means that global

issues have a more immediate impact on a broader society. The modern world is viewed as a 'global village' where divergent and diverse cultures and religions merge to highlight the 'interconnectedness of the world we live in' (Lane, 2013, p.9).

The Council of Europe[2] has been at the forefront of the debate around religion and education. The 9/11 terrorist attack and further attacks in France and Madrid are considered a catalyst for the renewed focus in Europe on religion and society (Jackson, 2013; Jackson, 2019; Lane, 2013; Schreiner, 2013). These events influenced the Council for Europe 'to include the religious dimension of intercultural education as part of its educational remit' (Jackson, 2013, p.5). Religion in education became an 'implicit element of the discourse of the EU' (Schreiner, 2013, p.5).

For many schools in Europe, RE is a contested issue. The argument can be divided into two perspectives. One perspective believes RE is a relic of former times and has no place in state-funded schools. The other perspective believes that RE has made a valuable contribution to forming identity and promoting dialogue in Europe (Schreiner, 2013). This reflects the debate that occupies public discourse in Ireland around RE and the dominance of Catholic primary schools in the educational landscape.

Against this background, most European countries acknowledge the need for school based RE, which is integrated into the school curriculum and aims to provide pupils with a broad knowledge and understanding of multiple religious traditions, beliefs and practices (Schreiner, 2013). How a country approaches RE in the curriculum depends on the 'religious landscape, state/church relations and school system structure' (Faas et al., 2020). Many governments support the teaching of RE 'in one form or another' in state-supported schools (O'Connell, 2017, p.364). A brief review of arrangements across Europe indicates that RE falls into three main categories (Schreiner, 2013):

- In countries such as Ireland, Poland and Italy, responsibility for RE at primary level rests with religious communities. It adopts a confessional approach, which refers to RE aligned to a particular religious tradition and underpinned by the teaching of a particular faith tradition's beliefs, practices and values. It seeks to nurture and reinforce the faith of students

[2] The Council of Europe is an international organisation that works to protect human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in Europe. It was founded in 1949, after World War II, to help keep peace and promote cooperation between European countries.

who are part of that tradition. Ireland has a rich tradition of educational provision by the Catholic Church.

- In some countries such as Austria, Belgium, Germany, Greece, Spain, England, Russia, Hungary, and parts of Switzerland, a partnership approach exists between the state and religious communities. Such a collaboration can foster a confessional approach, but not always.

- Finally, in countries such as Denmark, Finland, Estonia, Norway, Sweden and parts of Switzerland, the state takes full responsibility, and the approach is non-confessional (Schreiner, 2013).

RE is compulsory in some countries, such as Germany and Finland. While it is also compulsory in Ireland, the UK and the Netherlands, they also provide an opt-out option for parents. In countries such as Poland and Spain, RE is optional. France and Slovenia do not have RE on their curricula (Faas et al., 2020).

This brief overview demonstrates that RE continues to hold relevance across Europe, albeit in diverse forms. It indicates that RE is still considered a necessary element of a primary curriculum. The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe recognise the importance of providing children with the language associated with RE to facilitate inter-religious dialogue and reduce misinformation between religious and non-religious groups. Their motivation is their belief that 'this will contribute to democratic citizenship, mutual respect, religious freedom and an appreciation of diversity within society' (O'Connell, 2017, p.364).

Religious institutions, such as the Catholic Church in Ireland, are key advocates for the central role of RE in the full and harmonious development of the child. The opposing view to this argument is that RE should be separate from state-funded education. The NCCA acknowledges that most European states support RE in publicly funded schools (NCCA, 2017). Despite this, in a recent consultation on the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (NCCA, 2020) in Ireland, questions were asked about what role, if any, the state should have in providing religious and ethical education. The time allocated to RE is reduced in the *Primary*

*Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023). This implies a devaluing of the subject matter even though many multicultural European countries see value in providing RE in schools (O'Connell, 2017). Any proposal to undermine the provision of RE in Ireland would appear to be contrary to attitudes across Europe. The place of RE in educational policies across Europe continues to reflect the ongoing complex interactions between faith, secularisation, pluralism and globalisation. Debates persist around the role and content of RE. However, its contribution to fostering dialogue, citizenship and respect for diversity determines its ongoing relevance in modern European societies.

For the purposes of this research, which examines the current practices in RE from the perspectives of Catholic primary school principals in Ireland, Religious Education is defined as a holistic process that integrates both the cognitive and formational dimensions. RE involves formal teaching about religious traditions, beliefs, and values while nurturing pupils' spiritual growth and commitment to their faith. This dual focus is central to the school's Catholic ethos, contributing to pupils' moral and spiritual development and their religious formation through school activities, rituals, and community engagement.

### 2.2.2 Denominational education and the Patron

Denominational education and patronage are two terms that also require clarification. With regard to the term 'Patron', Section 8 of the Education Act (1998) describes the Patron as 'the body that establishes the school'. It is the Patron who determines the ethos of the school. While the day-to-day management of schools is entrusted to boards of management, these boards act on behalf of the Patron. The Patron of a Catholic primary school is generally the Bishop of the diocese where the school is situated. The Patron is responsible for providing a programme that underpins the school's ethos (Meehan & O'Connell, 2021). The Patron's programme implemented within a school is determined by the school's patronage. For instance, in Educate Together schools, the Patron's programme is entitled *Learn Together*, which is described as an ethical educational curriculum. Its mission statement promotes 'a philosophy of education in which no child is considered an outsider, which promotes the fullest development of ability irrespective of gender, class or stereotype.' (Educate Together, 2011, p.1). Another example is the Patron's programme for Community National Schools, entitled *Goodness Me, Goodness You.* It is presented as a multi-belief and values educational programme taught using a multi-disciplinary framework which 'enables children to

encounter identity education, values education, philosophy and multi-denominational religious education' (ETBI, 2015, p.4).

Denominational schools are schools that are associated with a particular religious ethos. A denominational school can be defined as a school under the patronage of a single religious community (Coolahan et al., 2012). In Ireland, 88.5% (DE, 2022) of primary schools are under the patronage of the Catholic Church. Another example of denominational schools are Church of Ireland schools, accounting for approximately 5.5% of schools in Ireland (DE, 2021). One of the key requirements of a denominational school is to provide 'religious education according to the traditions, practices and beliefs of the specified religious community' (NCCA, 2015, p.9). Community National Schools are multi-denominational schools. These schools have developed distinct religious education, ethical, and philosophical programmes that reflect and support the ethos of their respective schools (NCCA, 2015). Educate Together, which manages a network of Irish schools, has adopted equality-based rather than multi-denominational as a comprehensive term to reflect its inclusive mission. The ethos of Educate Together schools ‘stipulates equal respect for children from all social, cultural and religious backgrounds’ (Faas et al., 2018).

Statistics published by the DE in 2024, outlining the changes in school type between 2018 and 2022, show that the number of Catholic primary schools decreased by 37 to 2739 in 2022 (DE, 2024). The number of multi-denominational primary schools in 2022 was 166, an increase of 30 (DE, 2024). It is evident from these figures that denominational schools still dominate the educational landscape. This is against the backdrop of decreasing numbers in society of the religiously affiliated. In order to provide better choices to parents, the DE has promised 400 multi-denominational schools by 2030 (Loughlin, 2023).

### 2.3 Catholic Ethos

Described by Donnelly (2000) as a nebulous term, ethos is challenging to define precisely (Darmody & Smyth, 2018; McLaughlin, 2005; Donnelly, 2000). Many endeavour to interpret ethos. According to Glover and Coleman (2005), ethos is a term used to conceptualise and actualise a school environment. It is 'a pattern of belief and practice of a community that embodies its fundamental dispositions and objectives' (Jones & Barrie, 2015, p.46). Norman (2003) prefers to describe ethos as an atmosphere. Some refer to the school's values when describing ethos (Liddy

et al., 2019; Fischer, 2016). While the definitions may vary, all schools articulate an ethos through their 'choices and attitudes' (Meehan, 2013, p.60). The Education Act (1998) adopts the phrase 'characteristic spirit' in preference to the term ethos. The Act outlines the elements that shape a school's characteristic spirit as the 'cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which inform and are characteristic of the objectives and conduct of the school' (Government of Ireland 1998, 15(2)(b). In the *Primary School Curriculum: Introduction* (DES, 1999), there is a clear presentation of the importance and central role of ethos as the means by which schools define their purpose, their way of operating and how they foster and enrich their relationships. The *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023) recognises the responsibilities of boards of management regarding the maintenance of 'the characteristic spirit of the school' (DE, 2023, p.4).

Every primary school in Ireland espouses a particular ethos that reflects their particular type of school. For instance, the ethos of Catholic primary schools is delineated in the *Schedule*[3], within the *Deed of Variation*[4], which is a document that outlines the legal and operational framework under which a school operates, including the role of the Patron, the school's management, and its ethos. According to the *Deed of Variation*, Catholic schools will 'be managed in accordance with the rules laid down by the Minister for Education and in accordance with a Roman Catholic Ethos.' (Catholic Primary School Management Association, henceforth CPSMA, 2016, p.29). Catholic primary schools are governed by this document, negotiated by the Minister of Education and the Patrons.

The term Catholic comes from the Greek adjective *Katholikos*, meaning universal, and from the adverbial phrase *Kath'holou*, meaning 'according to the whole' (ICBC, 2018, p.5). The phrase embodies the holistic educational endeavour of Catholic primary schools in Ireland. They aim to deliver an inclusive, comprehensive education that incorporates both academic development and spiritual and moral growth. Catholic ethos relates to 'persons or communities, parishes, families,

[3] The Schedule is a section within the Deed of Variation. It specifically outlines what the Catholic ethos means for a school and outlines the Catholic identity and values of the school.

[4] The Deed of Variation is a formal legal document which outlines an agreement between the school's Patron and the Minister for Education. It ensures that the school is managed both according to national rules and in a way that reflects its Catholic ethos. It defines how a school is run, sets out the roles and responsibilities of the Patron, the school management, and the Department of Education. It also sets out the framework within which the school operates.

schools or religion programmes rooted in the Christian tradition of Roman Catholicism' (Kieran & Hession, 2005, p.170). Ethos underpins the entire teaching landscape of Catholic primary schools. It is not confined to the time allocated to the RE lesson; rather, it permeates the curriculum and beyond through symbols, rituals and the celebration of sacraments in the school (Kieran & Hession, 2005; McGrady, 2013). The characteristic spirit in the context of Catholic primary schools is invariably informed by the teaching of Jesus (Hyland, 2013).

For Catholic primary schools, ethos is expressed through the lens of the Catholic faith. It is best described as an 'invitation to allow Catholic faith to inform the values and traditions that are lived out daily in the school' (CSP, 2015, p.15). This definition allows for a dynamic understanding of ethos, which is 'informed by the teachings and traditions of the Catholic faith' (CSP, 2015, p. 7). This research focuses on current practices in RE as an aspect of the ethos of Catholic primary schools because the connection between education and religion is more far-reaching than a subject about religion. It 'relates to the characteristic spirit or ethos of a school being expressed in symbols, rituals and the wider life of the school as an educating community' (McGrady, 2013, p.79). The connection between RE and ethos is vital to this research as it provides the necessary context for evaluating how RE is integrated into and shaped by the school's overall values and practices. This foundational knowledge is necessary to draw meaningful conclusions about the factors shaping RE practices in Catholic primary schools. It also allows for assessing the potential impact of recent curriculum developments on RE.

For this research project, ethos will be defined as the lived expression of the Catholic faith that shapes the educational and spiritual life of the school. This ethos is not limited to the RE curriculum but is reflected in the values, traditions, and communal practices that inform the holistic development of students and the broader purpose of the Catholic primary school. This working definition is crucial to understanding how current RE practices align with the Catholic ethos in Irish primary schools and how broader developments influence these practices in the curriculum and societal shifts.

## 2.4 Religious Education and Ethos.

The Catholic School Partnership (CSP) was established in 2010 by the Irish Catholic Bishop's Conference. It served as a platform for collaboration among religious communities. The aims of CSP (2019, p.7) were to:

1. Foster coherence in Catholic Education at a national level
2. Provide a unified voice for Catholic education in the public forum, along with educational bodies and the government.
3. Support Catholic Educators in the core learning and teaching activities to foster high-quality lifelong learning and faith development for all learners.
4. Support the roles of Governance, Trusteeship and Management.

The Catholic School Partnership (CSP) identified RE as an expression of the ethos of Catholic primary schools. CSP developed an evaluation process to aid Catholic primary schools in assessing and articulating their Catholic identity. Revised in 2019, the evaluation process is now titled *Understanding and Living the Ethos in a Catholic Primary School: A Process Centred on Conversations* (CSP, 2019). CSP was succeeded by the Catholic Education Partnership (CEP) in 2020. Nevertheless, the document produced by CSP remains relevant for Catholic primary schools and continues to be made available by CEP. This document identifies five characteristics of Catholic primary schools. They are:

1. Catholic primary schools have a Catholic understanding of education
2. The Catholic primary school is a Christian community
3. The Catholic primary school is an agent of personal growth and social transformation
4. Catholic primary school communities are called to be followers of Christ
5. Religious education is an integral part of the life of the Catholic primary school

It is necessary to understand and examine these five characteristics of ethos to explore current practices in RE as it provides a framework within which RE is integrated and influenced by the school's broader values and practices of ethos. Particular emphasis is given to RE as the focus of

this research project. These characteristics offer an overarching understanding of Catholic primary school ethos in Ireland today. The first four provide a context for exploring RE as an integral part of the life of the school and its ethos.

### 2.4.1 Catholic primary schools have a Catholic understanding of education

Catholic education is grounded in a belief system that places God at the centre (McKinney, 2011). The defining characteristics of a Catholic primary school extend beyond the mere inclusion of RE or any specific religious or ethical instruction model. Instead, the educational philosophy of Catholic schools, as articulated by Hession (2015)., is grounded in a distinctive worldview that shapes its approach to teaching and learning. This philosophy views reality, the individual, and the purpose of human life through the lens of the Catholic faith.

Catholic education is concerned with the holistic development of the child. It is concerned with the whole human person. Catholic primary schools are places where the 'dignity, self-esteem and full development of each person, made in God's image and uniquely loved by God' is to the fore (SGN, 2010, p.142). Catholic primary schools extend beyond merely providing the skills needed to meet economic demands. Catholic education is based on a particular philosophy of education, concerned with the 'fundamental questions about the meaning of life,' based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ (ICBC, 2008, p.2). Jesus Christ represents the most comprehensive example of how to live a human life (Hession, 2015). Catholic primary schools strive to be places where children learn to live with others in a way shaped by how Jesus lived with and treated us' (Hyland, 2013, p.7). The child's spiritual development is central to the child's holistic development. So, while Catholic primary schools strive for excellence, children have a broad and balanced curriculum that celebrates achievement in all aspects of their lives, whether academic, sporting or the arts.

Catholic education is concerned with education's content and context (McKeown, 2013). As a result, children who attend Catholic primary schools should experience a Catholic philosophy of education, which is more than just a curriculum which includes RE. A Catholic philosophy is underpinned by the Catholic faith, which informs 'the values and traditions that are lived out and nurtured daily in the school' (CSP, 2016, p.15; Hyland, 2013). Examples include daily prayer, religious symbols, and celebrations associated with local and national saints, pupils and staff mirroring gospel values of compassion, kindness, and respect in their interactions. This expression

of faith does not exclude those of other faiths and those without faith. All children are welcomed into Catholic primary school communities regardless of their culture and traditions. Social inclusion is 'one of the great strengths of the Catholic primary school system' (CSP, 2016, p.8). Catholic primary schools are encouraged to work in cooperation with one another. A good example of this cooperation is when Catholic primary schools collaborate and share in celebrations such as the sacrament of confirmation.

### 2.4.2 The Catholic primary school is a Christian community

In the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Christian Education, *Gravissimum Educationis* emphasises that Catholic primary schools are meant to cultivate a school community imbued with 'a special atmosphere animated by the gospel spirit' (Vatican Council II, 1965, §8). Hession (2005, p.30) suggests that the holistic education provided in these schools aims to 'sustain and enhance people's capacity to discover the meaning and significance of life and develop as persons in community'. While all primary schools strive to foster a sense of community, in Catholic schools, according to O'Loan (2013, p.105), this community is distinctly marked by its role as 'a place in which faith is enabled, encouraged, modelled, facilitated, and taught'. Catholic primary schools, which are communities unto themselves, are also integral to the broader 'three-legged stool of family, community, and school' (McKeown, 2013, p.35). As described in Vision 08[5], Catholic schools aim to be 'warmly participative communities,' encompassing not just students and staff but also parents, ancillary staff, board members, and others associated with the school (ICBC, 2008, p.7).

Catholic primary schools are deeply rooted in and connected to the broader Catholic community, mainly through their integration into parish life. Catholic primary schools are 'rooted in parish communities where they are an important part of local life and foster a shared responsibility for Catholic education' (CSP, 2019, p.17). They actively contribute to the growth and development of their communities, reaching 'into the heart of its community' (McKeown, 2013, p.40). Strong links between the local Catholic primary school and the parish community are encouraged, with the parish supporting the Catholic home in return. This shared responsibility is especially evident in sacramental preparation and celebration, which aspires to be a collaborative effort between the

[5] Vision 08 is a pastoral letter published in May 2008 by the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference It outlines the vision and core principles for future Catholic education in Ireland.

school, home, and parish. Ultimately, Catholic primary schools are seen as an 'extension of the community of the family' (ICBC, 2008, p.8). An example of the collaborative responsibility of the home, school, and parish can be seen in the shared organisation and participation in liturgical celebrations and feast days, in particular feast days celebrating a local saint. This involves the school, parents and parish preparing pupils through teaching about the significance of the feast, organising liturgies, and involving pupils in roles such as readers, participating in the choir or bringing up symbols or gifts to the altar. This reflects the collaborative responsibility of the home, school, and parish to nurture pupils' religious and spiritual formation.

### 2.4.3 The Catholic primary school is an agent of personal growth and social transformation

Education in Catholic primary schools emphasises a holistic approach that nurtures intellectual, emotional and spiritual growth. Catholic primary school children are encouraged to develop their talents through a broad and balanced curriculum. Academic achievement, while valued, is not considered the ultimate goal. Through fostering a culture of respect for all, children are empowered to 'develop their talents, strengthen their bodies, expand their minds, open their imaginations and increase their spiritual and aesthetic sensibilities (Hession, 2015, p.71). In doing so, the Catholic faith inspires all those attending Catholic primary schools to express the values and traditions they encounter daily. Catholic primary schools not only educate pupils for academic success but also aspire to promote moral integrity and social responsibility in their pupils. Pupils are taught to become active participants in working towards a more just and compassionate society. Christian values such as justice, forgiveness, integrity, and respect for all are evident throughout the school and are actively taught through RE. The aspiration is that pupils are prepared 'for living in contact with other Christians and peoples of other religious faith, affirming their Catholic identity, while respecting the faith of others', thus indicating an awareness of the necessity to prepare students for life in an increasingly diverse society (IEC, 2015, p.18). Catholic education has moved from Catholicism as the religion of nationalism to a contemporary anthropological experience that allows for children's different learning styles and contains a solid interfaith and ecumenical emphasis capable of responding to the reality of a religiously diverse society (Kieran, 2005).

Children in Catholic primary schools are encouraged to engage in initiatives that promote social justice and peace concerning environmental care. Pope Francis, in Laudato Si', offers a profound vision emphasising the interconnectedness of all creation. Laudato Si is an encyclical of Pope

Francis published in 2015. It inspires pupils to develop a deep respect for the environment and a commitment to social justice. In Catholic primary schools, this message is developed through educational experiences that foster a sense of responsibility, empathy, and stewardship. This text can significantly shape a Catholic primary school's ethos and educational practices, guiding it as an agent of personal growth and transformation.

Personal responsibility is also taught, particularly regarding children's engagement with online platforms and various media formats. *Religious Education at the Heart of our Primary Schools* (Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, henceforth ICBC, 2017) was written in response to NCCA's consultation on *Time and Structure in a Primary Curriculum* (NCCA, 2017). It states:

> Catholic schools seek to provide space, both intellectual and emotional, where pupils can explore and imagine a world with a broad spiritual, religious and moral horizon, inviting them to understand themselves in solidarity with other people, especially those most in need, being responsible for the world, and open to mature relationships with others and with God. This broad spiritual horizon is essential today, as children often inhabit a complex world driven by a consumer-focused and materialistic vision of life (ICBC, 2017, p.8).

This clearly articulates the intention underpinning the Catholic primary school ethos. Built upon this strong foundation, reinforced by RE, Catholic primary schools foster individuals prepared to make meaningful contributions to the common good.

### 2.4.4 Catholic primary school communities are called to be followers of Christ

The true purpose of Catholic education is 'learning to relate in ever more true ways to the presence of God in oneself, in other people and the created world (Hession, 2015, p.50). Catholic primary schools are called to witness Christ in their daily endeavour. Catholic primary schools endeavour to emulate a unique vision of life, and an interrelated educational philosophy rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

There are many ways that this is evidenced in Catholic primary schools, both tangible and intangible. On entering Catholic primary schools, symbols of the Catholic faith are immediately evident; the crucifix and other religious artefacts are displayed throughout the school. The mutually respectful daily interactions where the whole school community is cherished and valued are not visible and yet equally important. The school's ethos is rooted in the belief that Jesus Christ

is the source of human dignity, the meaning of life, and the exemplar for Catholic education (Congregation for Catholic Education [CCE], 1977). The school's mission statement is grounded in the broader mission of Christ, embodying the school's dedication to advancing the Catholic Church's mission to transmit the life-giving message of Christ to every generation (ICBC, 2008). In fostering the holistic development of students, a Catholic primary school contributes to the formation of the entire person, and the life of Jesus serves as an enduring model for living a morally and ethically sound human life (Hession, 2015).

Children are invited to become more like Christ and 'live their lives guided by his values, to enter into relationship with Christ and to transform society in imitation of him' (Hession, 2013, p.125). Through this encounter with Christ, children are called to be followers of Christ, and 'the school models and promotes a philosophy of life inspired by belief in God and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ' (CPSMA, 2016, p.31). One way pupils can encounter Christ is through RE, which is the foundation of this study. Through RE, 'children are taught how to live in the Spirit of Jesus as they encounter him in prayer, in the Word of God, in the sacraments and their own lives' (IEC, 2015, p.19). RE provides opportunities for pupils to encounter Jesus through Gospel stories. Pupils learn about the life of Jesus and are encouraged to mirror his actions and teachings in their own lives. Through preparation for sacraments in RE, pupils are taught about the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist and his forgiveness through the sacrament of Reconciliation. RE teaches pupils how to pray, thus encouraging them to develop a personal relationship with Jesus.

### 2.4.5 Religious Education is an integral part of the life of the Catholic primary school

The Education Act 1998 recognises the Patron's right and role concerning the design, implementation and assessment of the RE curriculum. The curriculum presented in Catholic primary schools for RE 'includes faith formation, prayer and sacramental experiences and a growing awareness of being stewards of God's creation' (CSP, 2019, p.19). The *CPPRECI* (IEC, 2015) consists of four interrelated strands: Christian Faith, The Word of God, Liturgy/Prayer and Christian Morality, providing a core curriculum for the teaching of RE. The four strands' outline knowledge and understanding, skills and processes that make up the learning to be achieved at each level of the curriculum' (Hession, 2015, p.178). The curriculum adopts an outcomes approach that aligns with the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999). Constructed as a spiral formation, it provides 'a sequence for developing skills and knowledge' (IEC, 2015, p.39). The spiral curriculum

ensures the strands are not treated as 'discrete areas of learning, as they overlap and interact to form a holistic learning experience for the child' (Hession, 2015, p.178). It allows teachers to adapt the RE curriculum while considering the diversity of needs in the class. It also allows teachers to accommodate the children 'whose parents wish them to learn about, from or into the Christian religious tradition' (Hession, 2015, p.184). The *CPPRECI* (IEC, 2015) 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, 2014, p.22).

Approved by the IEC and rooted in the *CPPRECI* (IEC, 2015), the *Grow in Love* programme is used to teach RE in Catholic primary schools in Ireland. This programme is considered suitable for contemporary Ireland and is described as invitational, child-centred, sacramental and confessional (CSP, 2015). It is also intended to fulfil the requirements 'of a more secular and belief-diverse Ireland (Kieran & Mullally, 2021, p.424). The pedagogical approach adopted, the widely used shared praxis approach of Catholic RE educator Thomas H. Groome, the *Grow in Love programme* is structured under the headings Let's Look, Let's Learn, Let's Live. Let's Look explores the child's own life experience 'to help them to be able to recognise the presence of God in their lives'. Let's Learn introduces church teaching in an age-appropriate manner. Let's Live allows the child to consider how to bring what they have learned and put it to use in their own lives. This approach is characterised by three qualities, namely respect, invitation and conversation. In practice, this means that the opinions, belief systems, faith lives and worldviews of all the children in the class are respected. They are invited to engage with the programme material, and the classroom is a safe place where pupils can engage openly with the programme's content.

In *Share the Good News: The National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland* (ICBC, 2010), the Catholic Patrons outline that in schools with a Catholic ethos, RE 'will never simply be a general study of religions, their history, traditions and customs' (ICBC, 2010, p.57), rather it allows for 'students to become aware of and respond to the transcendent dimension of their lives' (ibid, p.58). RE 'justifies its place on the primary school curriculum by contributing to children's personal development' (Hession, 2015, p.21). RE in Catholic primary schools invites children:

To explore and understand how to live a Christian way of life. It introduces children to the Christian religious tradition and invites them to learn what it means to have a personal faith relationship with Jesus Christ. (Hession, 2015, p.146)

RE in Catholic primary schools aims to provide holistic education, addressing the pupil's intellectual, physical, cultural, moral, and spiritual aspects. This holistic development RE aims for is deeply rooted in nurturing each child's relationship with God while fostering respect for others (IEC, 2010). RE in Catholic primary schools invites pupils to explore and develop an understanding of how to live a Christian way of life. This invitation exposes students to the Christian religious tradition while encouraging them 'to learn what it means to have a personal faith relationship with Jesus Christ' (Hession, 2015, p.146).

In order to realise the first four characteristics presented here, RE plays a pivotal role. With its emphasis on holistic education, RE integrates intellectual, moral, spiritual and emotional development, which aligns with a Catholic understanding of education. The educational philosophy detailed in the *CPPRECI* (IEC, 2015) indicates the role of RE in integrating faith with daily living (Hession, 2015). Through teaching the values of love, respect, and service to others and God, RE fosters a sense of Catholic primary school as a Christian community. Activities such as praying together, engaging in acts of charity, and being involved in the liturgy all contribute to building a sense of community. By engaging with RE, pupils are encouraged to develop a moral compass rooted in Catholic teachings. Pupils are also given opportunities to serve others and work towards a common good. In RE, pupils are taught about the life and teachings of Jesus. Through the example provided by Jesus, pupils are encouraged to exhibit their faith through their choices and actions. Prayer, time for reflection and sacramental preparation all provide opportunities for pupils to foster a lifelong and meaningful relationship with God. It is, therefore, evident that RE is more than just a subject area in Catholic primary schools. Instead, it is a core element in the realisation of the Catholic ethos of the school.

Section 1.3 provided the historical context which underpins the evolution of RE in the primary curriculum in Ireland. The section that follows reflects specifically upon more recent developments which have impacted curriculum development in Ireland, which sees a move away from the central role previously afforded RE in the primary curriculum.

## 2.5 Developments in the 21st Century

Several pivotal moments have shaped the course of curriculum policy development and directly impacted the place of RE within the curriculum. Three are worthy of particular attention: The impact of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector, with its suggestion to divest schools from religious patronage; the development of a proposed curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics; and Ireland's poor performance in international education rankings.

### 2.5.1 The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism

Oversubscription[6] of school places at primary level became an issue during the early 2000s, particularly in densely populated urban areas in Ireland. For example, in 2007, as discussed in a number of Irish Times articles, the oversubscription of school places in Balbriggan, Dublin, in 2007 (Flynn, 2007; Healy, 2007; O'Brien, 2007), played a role in igniting public debate which called for the urgent need for reform in the patronage of schools in Ireland. Like many other areas, it experienced a rapid increase in population due to immigration and suburban expansion, which resulted in an increasingly multicultural and multi-religious population. This demographic shift significantly strained local school resources at a time when nearly 90% of primary schools were under Catholic patronage. Subsequently, Ruairi Quinn T.D., the Minister for Education in 2011, established the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector (henceforth the Forum). The establishment of the Forum in 2011 is attributed to the increased number of critical voices demanding a change to the education system in Ireland (Connolly, 2014; Kieran, 2013). In reality, the shortage of places in schools was a significant factor in its establishment. Overseen by an Advisory Group, it was described by Minister Quinn as a formal structure within which multilateral discussions and debates could take place to address the following three main themes:

- To determine the requirement for diversity of school type and the process necessary to implement a change of patronage.

[6] Oversubscription in primary schools in Ireland occurs where more children apply for places than the school has available. Every primary school has a limited number of spaces in its junior infant class. This figure is usually based on class size, number of teachers, and school capacity.

- The management of divestment, which sees the transfer of Catholic primary schools to a non-denominational school type.

- Ways in which faith schools could accommodate diversity where there is insufficient demand to warrant divestment of a school.

The subsequent *Report of the Forum's Advisory Group* was published in 2012. One of the report's core findings was the need for divestment by Catholic Patrons of schools to allow for more diverse provision (Coolahan et al., 2012). The Forum also recommended that the Rules for National Schools (1965) be updated. Specific attention focused on removing Rule 68 and reframing the right of parents to opt their children out of religious instruction. Rule 68, which historically positioned Religious Instruction as central to the moral and spiritual development of pupils in primary schools, reflected the dominance of denominational education, mainly Catholic, in the Irish educational system. Rule 68 identified RE as the curriculum's most important aspect, which was viewed as particularly problematic (O'Connell, 2018) and there was a call to rescind the rule in order to reflect broader changes in the educational landscape. In summary, the Forum recommended the following:

1. Increased diversity of school type.
2. Existing schools should be reconfigured to accommodate greater diversity.
3. Curriculum development should incorporate education about different ethical beliefs and religions.
4. Greater parental choice around the type of education that is provided for their children.
5. Opt-out from religious instruction should be more readily available.
6. Enhancement of training for teachers to equip teachers to teach in more diverse classrooms.
7. The fostering of ongoing consultation and engagement with all stakeholders in education to meet the community's needs as they evolved.

The Forum proposed that RE in denominational schools would no longer be taught as part of the integrated curriculum. The Forum also recommended introducing a new curriculum area, Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics, to accommodate those children who

chose to opt out of the RE lesson. By charging NCCA with developing a new curriculum area about ERB and Ethics, the state became involved with RE at primary level for the first time.

The Forum's final report generated much interest and discussion among those involved and interested in the provision of primary education. Some viewed the establishment of the Forum as a positive development towards opening up the debate around the provision of RE in state-funded primary schools (Faas et al., 2016). Some felt the Forum conveyed RE as a potential instrument for stability and accord rather than conflict. In contrast, others felt that the prime focus of the Forum was the divestment of Catholic primary schools (Renehan & Wiliams, 2015). Concern was expressed that denominational patronage was reflected in the report as having no meaningful contribution to society today (Conway, 2012). Finally, Van Nieuwenhove (2012) contended that while the proposals put forth by the Forum claim to establish a foundation for tolerance and neutrality, they are, in reality, deeply biased against religious perspectives and ethos. He further posited that the recommendations outlined in the report on patronage and pluralism threatened to undermine the Catholic ethos in schools, ultimately leading to a significant secularisation of Irish society.

The Forum and its subsequent recommendations are significant to this research for several reasons. Overall, the recommendations of the Forum have had continued repercussions for RE and Catholic primary schools. The subsequent reassessment of the significance attributed to RE has resulted in a notable shift in focus within the recently published *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools (*DE, 2023). RE no longer holds the central position afforded it in the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999). The question now is how this shift in emphasis might impact practices in RE and how Catholic primary schools manage the provision of RE as a core element of maintaining their ethos.

### 2.5.2. The proposed introduction of Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics

The Forum (2012) advised that the curriculum for primary schools includes a subject entitled Education about Religion and Beliefs and Ethics (henceforth ERB and Ethics). This suggestion came about based on inadequate opt-out arrangements from RE in denominational primary schools (O'Connell, 2017). The NCCA was tasked with developing such a curriculum (Coolahan et al., 2012). ERB and Ethics does not advocate any individual religion or belief system but instead

acknowledges the position of different religious denominations in society (Renehan & Williams, 2015).

Despite the recommendation by the Forum advisory group that such a subject would be neutral, any approach to RE could never be neutral (Connolly, 2014). NCCA's consultation document on the revised curriculum acknowledges that 'no subject or teaching is value free' (NCCA, 2020, p.22). According to CSP (2019, p.7), 'there is no such thing as a value-neutral education.' Lane (2013, p.41) refers to the 'myth of neutrality', which postulates that 'religion and education can be presented in a value-free, detached and neutral fashion'. Education can never be considered a 'neutral activity or value free', regardless of the expressed worldview (Hession, 2015). To suggest that religious knowledge could be communicated in a neutral way is a secular belief. Indeed, Conway posits that teaching RE to children without attending to the living faith rooted in a community is nothing more than a consumerist approach that seeks to ensure that all education is relevant to the economy (Conway, 2012).

In the Draft *Primary Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2020) published for consultation in 2020, the NCCA suggest that there are demands to include ERB and Ethics into a revised curriculum to reflect the increased diversity in Irish society. No specific evidence to support this claim is given. Indeed, when NCCA engaged in public consultation around the inclusion of ERB and Ethics in 2016, it generated feedback that caused the introduction of the proposed subject area to stall (Meehan & O'Connell, 2021). In the recently published *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023), Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics is not recognised as a distinct subject area. Instead, the term 'values' is frequently mentioned throughout the document, yet it lacks a clear definition of what specific values are intended.

Additionally, the Patron's programmes are categorised into two groups: those that are denominational or religious and those that are 'ethical or multi-belief and values-based' (NCCA, 2023, p. 19). This classification challenges Catholic primary schools, implying that RE lacks ethical considerations or values-based content. Such implications risk undermining RE's essential role in primary education, suggesting that it is not adequately aligned with contemporary ethical standards. Furthermore, RE is portrayed as less focused on ethics despite being fundamentally values-based and encompassing rich ethical teachings, including justice, compassion, and respect.

However, it should also be acknowledged that the renaming of RE to Religious/Ethical/Multi-belief and Values Education – The Patron's Programme has the potential to strengthen the position of RE in the curriculum as it is now aligned with denominational and non-denominational schools under a unified title. This indicates a shared commitment to pupils' moral and ethical development irrespective of the denomination of the school they attend. Such a position strengthens the contribution of RE in Catholic primary schools to pupils' ethical and spiritual development and counteracts any misconception that may arise around its inadequacy.

Developments in the 21st Century have significantly shaped the place of RE within the primary school curriculum. Recent changes reflect an emerging challenge to RE's traditional dominance in previous curricula. In the following section, key evolving issues which are impacting RE practices in Catholic primary schools are examined.

### 2.6 Modern Ireland a changed context

There are a number of issues in contemporary Ireland that directly impact the teaching of RE in Catholic primary schools. What follows highlights issues of note, namely, increasing diversity in society and how it is managed in Catholic primary schools, teacher commitment to teaching RE and opportunities for teachers to engage in Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in the area of RE.

#### 2.6.1 Diversity

The changed demographic in Irish society has resulted in increased diversity in the student population in Catholic primary schools. Schools are increasingly facing new challenges as a result of what is described as growing secularisation coupled with increased migration of people who are culturally and religiously diverse (Faas et al., 2016). This diversity becomes a key consideration in how schools operate. Central to this discussion is the apparent mismatch between the increasingly diverse student population and the dominance of denominational schools. In the first instance, as evidenced by census figures, while those who identify as Catholic remain in the majority, those ticking the no religion box have increased. According to data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO, 2023), 69% of the population currently identify as Roman Catholic, marking a 10% decrease since 2016. Additionally, 14% of the population now identify as having no religious affiliation. The data further highlights a decline in those identifying as Catholic, now

standing at 68%, while those professing no religion have risen to 14.3% (CSO, 2023). Mass attendance figures also reflect a significant change in attitude among the general population. Where once up to 95% of the population reported weekly Mass attendance in the 1970s, a much lower rate of 36% was recorded in 2016 (ICBC, 2010; McGarry, 2018). Most compelling is the reduction in Mass attendance among younger age groups, which fell to 24% (ICBC, 2010). Further diversity in the population has occurred due to increased immigration to Ireland from abroad (Sheridan, 2022). Preliminary figures published by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) show that since the last census, the population in Ireland has increased by 8%, with non-Irish citizens accounting for 12%. Despite the state taking a more significant role in educational provision and much political and public debate around school patronage, the vast majority of primary schools remain under the patronage of the Catholic Church (Griffin, 2019). Figures published by the Department of Education in 2022 show that the number of mainstream schools totalled 3,104. 88.8% of these schools have a Catholic ethos. The fact that nearly 90% of primary schools in Ireland remain under Catholic patronage has been a source of criticism despite efforts by the Forum, the Catholic Church, and the Irish Government to address concerns about diversity and inclusivity in education. Renehan and Williams (2015) argue that this dominance is increasingly out of step with Irish society's growing religious and cultural pluralism.

Changing attitudes regarding social issues in Ireland also reflect a weakening of the position and influence of the Catholic Church (Kowalski et al., 2020). The marriage equality referendum of 2015, in which 62% voted in favour, and the abortion referendum of 2018, in which 66.4% voted in favour, both indicate a dramatic shift in attitudes among the population in Ireland. This shift is mirrored within the teaching cohort in Catholic primary schools. The *Children's School Lives*, a longitudinal cohort study of primary schooling in Ireland (Soan et al., 2021), reports that 91% of the teachers who responded identified as Roman Catholic. However, the study further revealed that only a small proportion, 13%, reported attending religious services weekly, while 12% indicated they attended services either once a year or not at all. Diminished religious practice and changing social attitudes indicate a weakening commitment to Catholic teachings and beliefs. Such trends have significant implications for Catholic primary school teachers' formation and long-term sustainability. This weakening of religious commitment poses significant challenges for teachers working in Catholic primary schools. It suggests that many teachers may feel less connected to the Catholic ethos that traditionally underpins the identity of these schools. This disconnect could

impact how effectively teachers engage with and promote the religious and moral teachings central to Catholic education.

Modern Ireland is now described as a multi-ethnic and multi-faith society (Faas et al., 2016). Schools are being called on to respond to this increased classroom diversity (Parker-Jenkins & Masterson, 2013). In what is referred to as the 'detraditionalisation' of the school system in Ireland, schools are being asked to provide for a 'pluralism of educational provision', which reflects a more diverse society (Byrne & Devine, 2017, p.473). In the *Draft Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (NCCA, 2020), Irish society is described as having experienced unprecedented change since the inception of the *Primary School Curriculum* in 1999. The NCCA highlights diversity as a consideration central to educators in modern Ireland (NCCA, 2020). Diversity is a theme in the recently published *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023). Here, educators are called upon to consider, among other things, culture, ethnic status and religion when planning for learning in their classrooms. While the majority of primary schools enrol children from diverse religious backgrounds, it is argued that 'the school ethos and curriculum do not adequately address the needs of children of minority faith backgrounds' (Faas et al., 2015, p.91). Teachers in Catholic primary schools face the dilemma of engaging in RE for children of the Catholic faith while also being conscious of their responsibility to children who do not wish to be formed in the Christian faith (Hession, 2013, p.53). Schools are left to themselves to navigate this reality.

### 2.6.2 Management of opt-outs

Parents have a constitutional right to withdraw their child from RE and sacramental preparation in primary schools in Ireland (Education Admissions to Schools Act 2018). How schools manage this is up to them. There is no specific procedure that they must follow. The management of pupils who wish to opt out of RE in denominational schools was a key concern of the Forum (2012). In the report produced by the Forum, smaller rural schools were considered particularly disadvantaged concerning the availability of appropriate alternative supervision for pupils who did not wish to participate in the RE lesson. However, as highlighted by Kieran and Mullally (2021, p.432), arrangements around how these opt-outs are managed remain 'ambiguous and insufficient.' The suggestion that these pupils could be removed from the classroom during RE lessons is highly problematic as it only serves to highlight differences between the religious beliefs of pupils, thus

encouraging a sense of other as well as potentially resulting in discrimination and a sense of division among pupils (Faas et al., 2018; Heinz et al., 2018).

The Archdiocese of Dublin, through its official website, provides formal guidelines that recognise and uphold the legal right of students to opt out of religious instruction. It also emphasises that parents are responsible for notifying the school of their wish to do so. However, no clear framework is provided on what alternative activities should be offered to these students, leaving much of the decision-making to the discretion of individual schools. Similarly, other diocesan websites, such as those for the Dioceses of Cork and Ross or the Archdiocese of Armagh, generally suggest that schools should accommodate students' rights while also balancing the preservation of the school's Catholic identity. However, they do not provide any practical guidance with regard to how schools might manage this. The absence of clear, structured guidance can lead to variations in practice. However, Catholic Patrons have produced a document outlining guidance for Catholic schools. Published in 2015 by CSP*, Catholic Primary Schools in a Changing Ireland – Sharing Good Practice on Inclusion of All Pupils* (CSP, 2015) is a resource for Catholic schools which focuses on developing policies on inclusion and sharing best practices. This document outlines a vision of what a Catholic primary school strives to be. It also details good practices concerning the education of all pupils in Catholic primary schools. It considers how schools might enhance the holistic education of non-Catholic pupils in Catholic primary schools. Several options are provided with regard to facilitation pupils who are opting out of RE. The suggestions range from providing alternative work to the pupil while in the same classroom to removal to an alternative classroom setting. Split timetabling is also suggested as is the parent or guardian absenting the pupil from the class (CSP, 2016).

The lack of availability of primary school places in Ireland often results in parents having no choice but to enrol their children in Catholic primary schools even though they do not subscribe to the Catholic religion. Any suggestion that pupils who were not of the Catholic faith would lead to parents compromising their personal beliefs to guarantee a place for their child in their local Catholic primary school was addressed by the 2018 amendment to the Education Admissions to School Act 2016. As Faas et al. (2020) noted, this amendment ensures that oversubscribed Catholic primary schools can no longer discriminate against non-Catholic children who wish to be enrolled in their schools. This suggests that there should be no barrier which prevents non-Catholic pupils

from enrolling in Catholic primary schools. While this suggests the potential for increased diversity in classrooms in Catholic primary schools, Faas et al. (2020) observe insufficient information about the strategies schools adopt to accommodate this increased diversity in their student population. It is claimed by Hannigan et al. (2022) that initial teacher education in Ireland is insufficiently preparing teachers for the growing diversity in classrooms. Their study found that pre-service teachers often feel uncertain about reconciling a school's ethos with the values they are expected to teach, especially on sensitive topics like sexuality. This highlights the profession's limited ability to engage with cultural and religious diversity effectively. The situation is further exacerbated by the disconnect between the perspectives and lived experiences of an increasing number of pupils in Catholic primary schools and the faith based, sacramental RE curriculum that teachers are required to implement in Catholic primary schools (Kieran & Mullally, 2021).

### 2.6.3 Teacher Commitment and Continuing Professional Development

For the purposes of this study, teacher commitment refers to the teacher's personal faith and belief in the value of RE as a worthwhile and meaningful aspect of primary education. The part played by the classroom teacher in Catholic primary schools needs consideration in light of societal changes. The role of the teacher 'is paramount in delivering any programme of religious education to children' (Mahon & O'Connell, 2015, p.15). The significant importance of the role played by the class teacher is clearly stated in the teacher's manual for the *Grow in Love* programme, where it outlines that 'it is the individual teacher in each particular classroom who brings the programme and the faith it seeks to communicate to life' (IEC, 2017, p19). Whereas once Dineen (2021) lamented the lack of research regarding the attitude of teachers in Catholic primary schools towards their roles and responsibilities concerning RE, recent research by Global Researchers Advancing Catholic Education (henceforth GRACE) in Ireland (2024) provides a voice for teachers as well as others involved in Catholic education at primary and secondary level. GRACE Ireland (2024, p.28) found that a 'lack of personal faith/commitment' on the part of the teacher was an inhibiting factor in their teaching of RE. Education colleges in Ireland offer their students initial education in preparation for teaching RE in Catholic primary schools (O'Farrell, 2023; O'Connell, 2018;). Section 37.1 of the Employment Equality Act 2004-2011 provides that denominational organisations such as schools can protect the school's ethos through their appointment and promotion procedures. The Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference (2018) set out criteria for the

qualifications necessary to teach in a Catholic primary school. A certificate to teach Catholic RE is a requirement for teachers who intend to teach in Catholic primary schools. This qualification is no guarantee of the teacher's commitment to teaching RE or upholding the school's ethos (O'Farrell, 2023). A study conducted by Heinz et al. (2018) found a tradition of compliance among teachers regarding maintaining the status quo of teaching RE. Research which engaged with initial student teachers indicates 'a growing disconnect between the beliefs of some aspiring teachers and the identity of the Catholic primary school' (O'Connell, 2018, p.668). Some research in this area also indicates 'that there is a considerable anxiety and confidence lacking for some teachers who engage in Religious Education' (Dineen, 2021, p.193). This issue is undoubtedly exacerbated once these teachers find themselves teaching in schools as 'the real need emerges when they become teachers facing real issues and challenges' (O'Connell, 2018, p.669).

Meehan et al. (2024) identified the deficiency in policy statements for RE in many schools and the dearth of regular, high-quality training and opportunities for continuing professional development as definite factors in the failure of teachers to teach RE. This, coupled with the lack of adequate oversight, means RE is not given the attention it should. Unfortunately, there appears to be a marked absence of structured continuing professional development available to teachers once they have qualified (Dineen, 2021; O'Connell, 2018). CPD is crucial in ensuring continued development in classroom practice and improving learner outcomes (Postholm, 2012). Byrne and Sweetman (2019, p.231) identified that high-quality CPD can positively increase 'the teacher's impact on student learning and encourage teachers as professionals and in their commitment to their role'. Significant training and supports were provided by the Department of Education to ensure the success of the introduction of the *Primary Language Curriculum* (DES, 2019) and all schools are currently engaging in a suite of supports around the introduction of the *Primary Mathematics Curriculum* (2023). A more systematic approach to ongoing in-service around matters about RE for teachers in Catholic primary schools is necessary (Meehan & O'Connell, 2021; Kieran & Mullally, 2021; Dineen, 2021).

### 2.7 Curriculum policy development and Religious Education

The connection between religion and education in Ireland has generated much debate in recent years (Dineen, 2021). This debate centres on how the current primary education system, the patronage model, is perceived to fail to meet the needs of a more diverse, multi-faith society.

(Dineen, 2021; Faas et al., 2020; Faas et al.,2018; Rougier & Honohan, 2015; Renehan & Williams, 2015). This socio-cultural debate continues to considerably influence education policy and curriculum development in Ireland (Fitzpatrick et al., 2014).

Values are inherent in educational policies (Regmi, 2019). The literature pertaining to curriculum policy development emphasises the inherent connection between societal values and educational policies (Bacchi, 2000; Ball, 2016; Walsh, 2018; Regmi, 2019). It is important to consider the values embedded in educational policies, particularly concerning RE, and how they shape the educational landscape in Ireland. The development of curricula entails considering the values of greatest significance from the particular culture of a society (Walsh, 2018). The definition proposed by Bowe et al. (1992, p.3), that 'policies are thus the operational statements of values', seems most appropriate since RE policy, which this chapter is exploring, is inherently linked to a school's core values. Policy always reflects social values (Ball, 2016). Indeed, values and competing interests are central to shaping policy (Bacchi, 2000). Policy does not exist in a vacuum. In order to examine the values and concerns addressed in a particular policy, it should be analysed from a historical perspective (Regmi, 2019). The historical evolution of policy development is necessary to understand the shaping of policy representation and interpretation (Ball, 1993). Bacchi (2000, p.47) describes the meanings that 'are bound to historical conditions.' There is a change in the values underpinning the *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023) compared to the *Primary Curriculum* (1999). Evidence of that change is the treatment of RE. What follows is an examination of the treatment of RE in the most recent iteration of the curriculum at primary level.

### 2.8 Religious Education and the Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools (DE, 2023)

The specification for RE at Junior Cycle level provided by the NCCA, the valuable role provided by RE in the holistic education of the child is clearly outlined:

> Religious Education promotes the holistic development of the person. It facilitates students' intellectual, social, emotional, spiritual and moral development. Religious Education provides a space for students to encounter and engage with the deepest and most fundamental questions relating to life, meaning and relationships. It encourages students to reflect, question, critique, interpret, imagine and find insight into their lives. The students' experience and continuing search for meaning are encouraged and supported (NCCA, 2017, p.6).

It is perhaps surprising then that there is a move away from this thinking at the primary level in the recently published *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023). The place of RE is in stark contrast to the presentation of RE in the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999). There is a clear shift in emphasis regarding the centrality of RE. This new document reduces the time allocated for RE by thirty minutes weekly. There has also been a restructuring of the way the curriculum is presented. Traditional subject areas are consolidated into broader curriculum areas. For instance, Social, Personal and Health Education and Physical Education are now redefined under the term Wellbeing. Some subject areas, such as Physical Education, have experienced a reduction in their allocated instructional time compared with the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES,1999).

However, the integration of subjects is encouraged, supporting a cross-curricular approach to learning whereby knowledge and skills can be applied in various contexts. The *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023) promotes 'integrated learning experiences' (DE, 2023, p.26) as central to a child's learning. The document outlines that the purpose of integration is to connect the 'curriculum to children's lives in meaningful ways'. (Ibid, p.26). This document seems to contradict itself. Taken from the *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023), Figure 2.1 *Curriculum areas and subjects* (DE, 2023) include RE as a subject area. However, the graphic presented in Figure 2.2, *Using time to support integrated learning, teaching and assessment* (DE, 2023), appears to separate RE from the integrated curriculum. Religious/Ethical/Multi-belief, and Values Education – The Patron's Programme, is positioned alongside non-academic activities such as roll call, recreation, breaks and assembly. This suggests that RE is no longer viewed as integral to the core educational objective of the curriculum that is experienced at primary level.

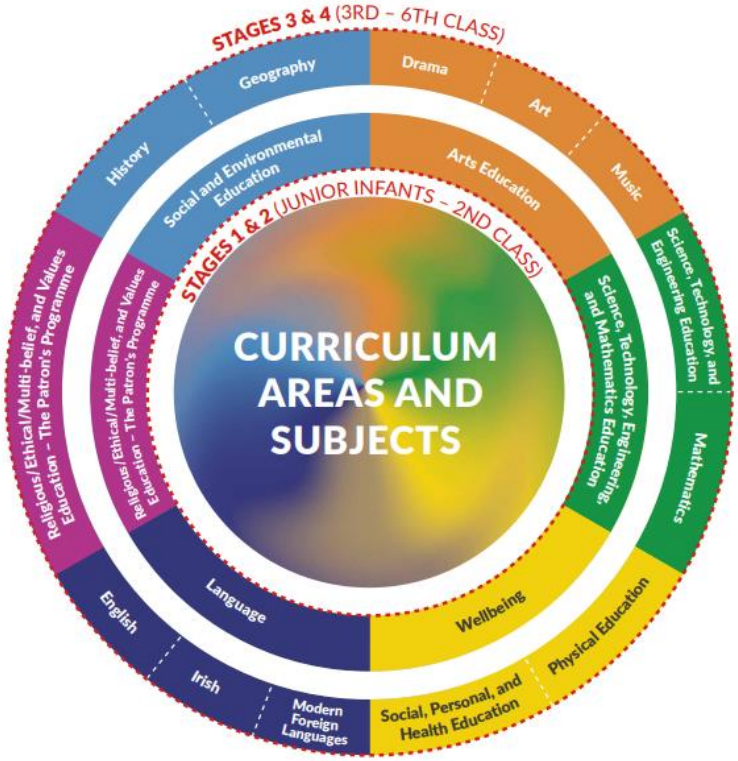


Figure 2.1. Curriculum areas and subjects from *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools,* DE, 2023, p.15

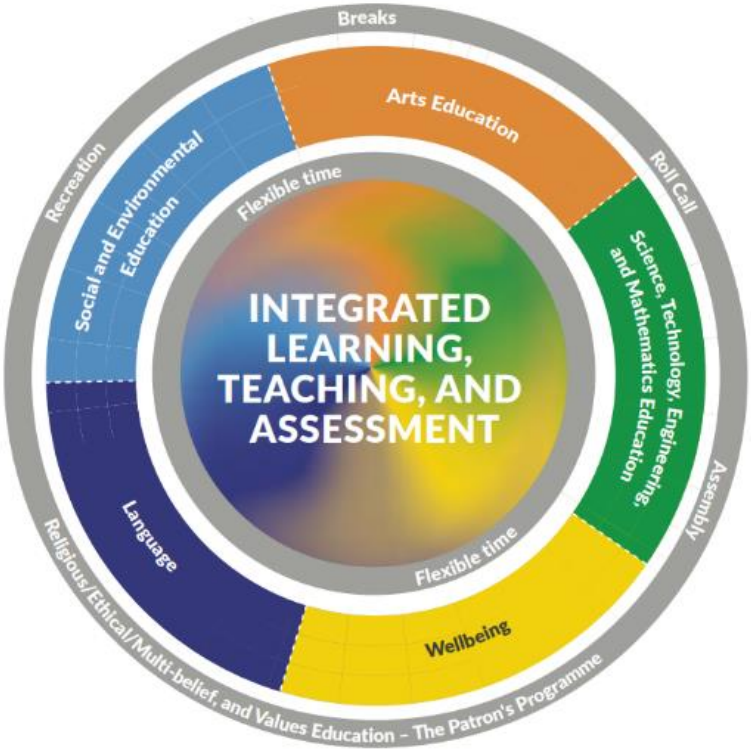


*Figure 2.2. Using time to support integrated learning, teaching and assessment from Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools, DE, 2023, p.29*

In the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999), RE was allocated two and a half hours per week in every class. In the *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023), the time allocation for RE for junior and senior infants is cut by forty minutes per week. From first class upwards it is reduced by thirty minutes per week. RE is not the only subject area to be reduced; however, as demonstrated in Figure 2.2, RE is the only subject depicted as outside the integrated curriculum. Any time reduction for subjects other than RE will not compromise the subject area as they are part of an integrated curriculum.

An area of the curriculum where RE shows particular alignment is wellbeing. *The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (DES, 2018) emphasises the importance of holistic development, supporting students' social, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. This policy resonates with the goals of RE in Catholic primary schools. The role of RE in contributing to pupil wellbeing is well-supported by existing research (Meehan, 2018; Sullivan, 2017; Spencer et al., 2016), which highlights how RE promotes spiritual growth, moral development, and a strong sense of community among students. RE provides a comprehensive learning experience, ensuring a holistic

education for the child (O'Farrell, 2023). *The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (DES, 2018) includes spiritual wellbeing as a core component of a student's overall development. Attending to the 'spiritual dimension of learning contributes to mental emotional and physical wellbeing' (De Souza, 2016, p.126). The aim of the *CPPRECI* (IEC, 2015, p.31) is to 'help children mature in their spiritual, moral and religious lives'. *The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (2018) promotes a supportive and inclusive school environment where all students feel secure and valued. Similarly, the *CPPRECI* (2015) promotes inclusivity and respect through the *Grow in Love* programme. Using an invitational, child-centred approach, RE encourages students to share their thoughts and beliefs, fostering a sense of belonging and mutual respect. The RE curriculum and the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (DES, 2018) support a holistic approach to education. RE's focus on intellectual, moral, physical, and spiritual development aligns with the goal of nurturing all aspects of a child's wellbeing as outlined in the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (DES, 2018). By addressing students' broader development beyond academic achievement, RE and the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (DES, 2018), advocate for a balanced approach to education that supports the whole child. The *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (DES, 2018) encourages connecting with nature to support mental health. Similarly, RE in Catholic schools promotes a sense of stewardship for God's creation, encouraging students to value and care for the environment. This shared focus on environmental consciousness can enhance students' sense of responsibility and connection to the world around them. By addressing students' moral, spiritual, and social development, RE provides foundational skills and values that align with the aims of the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (DES, 2018), creating a harmonious approach to fostering the holistic wellbeing of students.

While the *CPPRECI* (IEC, 2015) recognises the importance of integrating various subjects within the primary curriculum to promote holistic education, it also emphasises that RE should maintain a clear and distinct place within the school timetable, encompassing educational and faith formation dimensions. The *CPPRECI* (IEC, 2015) highlights that RE in Catholic primary schools is not merely an academic subject but also aims at nurturing children's personal faith. Therefore, it involves both an educational component, which focuses on teaching beliefs, values, and religious practices, and a faith formation component, which focuses on fostering spiritual growth and religious identity.

The *CPPRECI* (IEC, 2015) advocates that while interdisciplinary links with subjects such as literacy, history, arts, mathematics and social, environmental and scientific education are encouraged where appropriate, the unique nature of RE should not be compromised by integration with other subjects. A dedicated time allocation for RE is stressed to ensure that children receive adequate instruction in faith matters, distinct from other curriculum areas. Furthermore, it is crucial to preserve RE's distinct religious, spiritual, and moral focus, ensuring its core principles are not diluted through integration (IEC, 2015).

While there is little doubt in the value of integration, integrating RE with other primary curriculum areas presents significant challenges, particularly in increasingly diverse classroom settings. Ensuring respect for pupils who choose not to participate in RE remains a key issue. There is a risk that students who have opted out may still be inadvertently exposed to religious content through cross-curricular activities or integrated learning approaches.

### 2.8.1 Evolving educational priorities: The marginalisation of RE in Ireland's primary curriculum

Educational policy is viewed by successive governments globally as central to economic success. This perspective, supported by Bell and Stevenson (2015), emphasises the role of education as a means to cultivate a skilled and adaptable workforce. Vidovich (2007) further highlights how governments focus on education as a means of success in the global market. Economic concerns have influenced and continue to significantly influence education policy in Ireland (Fitzpatrick et al., 2014) as the country endeavours to align itself with international benchmarks. The outcomes from economically driven policy development have not always proved successful. Increased pressure on schools to deliver more has resulted in curriculum overload, where teachers focus on what is measured and inspected. This, in turn, sees a marginalisation of RE from the curriculum. What follows will elaborate on these aspects of the changing education landscape in Ireland and how these shifts have impacted RE within the broader curriculum.

#### 2.8.1.1 Curriculum Overload

Curriculum overload is a phrase that has emerged to describe the difficulty experienced by teachers and school leaders as they attempt to fully implement the curriculum while balancing the needs of busy classrooms. Effective curriculum implementation is considered a significant challenge for

teachers. It is related to class size, curriculum content, the paperwork associated with preparation for teaching, effective planning for pupils with special educational needs and school engagement with whole-school initiatives promoted by outside agencies, such as environmental or healthy eating initiatives (INTO, 2015). According to a report produced by the NCCA in 2010, teachers reported that they had 'insufficient time to fully implement curriculum subjects' (NCCA 2010, p.5). The shift in curriculum priorities and curriculum overload contribute to prioritising one subject over another at the expense of a more holistic education.

Particular refocusing of priorities resulted from Ireland's failure to measure up on the international stage in education rankings by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2009, specifically the *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA). This international assessment tests fifteen-year-olds in literacy, maths and science. Ireland generally performed well in these tests, but the poor performance in 2009, when Ireland dropped from 5th to 17th place, prompted a national reconsideration of educational policy (Kennedy, 2013). Failure to perform in the PISA test produces a 'policy window' through which national policy debate gains support for 'new policy voices' (Ball, 2016, p.1048), such as those advocating increased emphasis on literacy and numeracy. As a result, the DES launched *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011 - 2020*. Schools must now report literacy and numeracy standardised test results annually to the Department of Education. This move appears to attribute greater value to these subject areas. The shift in priorities increased initiatives in literacy and numeracy, all competing for space in an already overcrowded curriculum, thus compounding demands on primary schools to deliver more (NCCA, 2020).

Subsequent curriculum development, which entails redrafting the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999), sees a move to outcomes-based learning approaches. Learning outcomes refer to statements outlined in curriculum specifications that detail the knowledge, understanding, skills, and values pupils acquire and demonstrate following a lesson or series of lessons on a particular topic. An outcomes-based approach to education that emphasises cognitive learning can lead to neglecting the spiritual dimension in the lives of the children being taught (Buchanan & Hyde, 2008). This emphasis on outcomes sees a shift from more holistic approaches. It prioritises the cognitive dimensions of a child's learning (Buchanan & Hyde, 2008). Productivity is the ultimate

goal in systems that focus on performativity (Ball, 2016). There is an increased tendency for curriculum policies to focus on student outcomes, which results in a 'narrowing of the curriculum' (Gleeson et al*.,* 2020, p.479). Increasing awareness and focus on measurable goals sees a hierarchy evolve where some subjects are considered worthy of more time (Usher, 2016).

#### 2.8.1.2 Curriculum oversight

A school board of management manages Catholic primary schools on behalf of the Patron. Section 15 of the Education Act 1998 states that the board is responsible for providing an appropriate education for each pupil. It also states that the board is accountable to the Patron for:

> Upholding the characteristic spirit of the school as determined by the cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which inform and are characteristic of the objectives and conduct of the school. (Education Act 1998 2(b))

According to the *Governance Manual for Primary Schools 2023-2027* (DE, 2023), responsibility lies with the principal for the day-to-day management of the school, which includes guidance and direction of the teachers. With regard to RE specifically, SGN (IEC, 2010) designates the principal as responsible for facilitating and overseeing 'a consistent and coordinated approach to religious education, appropriate to the school's ethos' (p.146). In accordance with the accountability associated with the role, the principal presents regular updates at board meetings around curriculum development and teaching and learning in the school. To inform this report, the principal must gather information about the work taking place in all classrooms in the school through formal and informal means. All staff must present a written report entitled *'Cuntas Míosúil'* to the principal at the end of each month. This document outlines the work in all curriculum areas covered in class. This record can prove helpful to the principal in their assessment and monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning in each class.

The Department of Education Inspectorate conducts systematic inspections on the quality of planning, teaching, and learning in all primary schools to ensure complete accountability regarding inspection, reporting, and support of schools. To aid school personnel and the inspectorate in monitoring and inspecting schools, the Department of Education Inspectorate produced a document entitled *Looking at Our School 2022: A quality framework for primary schools and special schools.* This document outlines statements of effective practice as a guide for school leaders and teachers as to the success of learner outcomes and learner experiences. However, the

inspectorate has no role at the primary level in the inspection and evaluation of RE. The basis for overseeing planning, teaching and learning in all curriculum subjects except RE is clear. There is a marked absence of accountability in RE. This lack of oversight is cited by Meehan et al. (2024) as a core reason for teachers not meeting RE requirements at primary level.

Oversight of RE in Catholic primary schools is the responsibility of the school Patron. Following Vatican II, the model adopted by Patrons emphasises support rather than inspection (Sexton & McCormack, 2021). *Share the Good News: The National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland*, published by the Irish Episcopal Conference in 2010, envisages that Catholic primary schools develop a close relationship with the parish, particularly with the local parish priest. Regular visits from the priest are expected to underpin the support provided to the school as a Catholic primary school. Diocesan Advisors (DA) are appointed by the bishops of the diocese 'to oversee and support religious education and faith life of the schools in their diocese' (Sexton & McCormack, 2021, p.4). It is not intended that DAs have a formal role in inspecting the quality of teaching and learning in RE. With no formal assessment and no structured oversight of RE, it is not surprising that it is increasingly being pushed to the periphery of the curriculum (Sheridan, 2022). This situation is further complicated by ongoing questions regarding the value of RE within the school day, with some advocating for its complete removal (Faas et al., 2018; Lumby & Mac Ruairc, 2021).

#### 2.8.1.3 Sacramental preparation

The preparation and celebration of the sacrament of the Eucharist, commonly known as First Holy Communion, has been a focal point in numerous public debates concerning education, the role of the state, and the place of RE in schools (Kitching & Shanneik, 2015). The Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) surveyed its members in 2012 to examine the amount of time spent on RE in primary schools. 70% of participants who responded indicated additional time was given to sacramental preparation. What is referred to here as sacramental preparation refers to the preparation of pupils for the ceremonies associated with the Sacrament of Reconciliation, Eucharist and Confirmation. This extra time was over and above the two-and-a-half hours allocated to RE. Sacramental preparation has traditionally occurred in Catholic primary schools as part of the RE programme. Kitching and Shanneik (2015, p.6) suggest that the celebration of First Holy Communion continues to be celebrated by many because of a shared sense of cultural

traditions rather than an overt commitment to religious practices. The study revealed that although children and their families did not regularly attend Mass, First Holy Communion was regarded as a significant cultural rite of passage, a key milestone in growing up in Ireland.

Faas et al. (2018) also argue that involvement in sacramental celebrations is as much cultural as it is about faith formation. In an article published in the *Irish Times,* Faas (2017), critically examines the appropriateness of conducting sacramental preparation during school hours. He challenges the notion of the school as the 'primary nurturer of belief,' arguing that this responsibility should rest with parents. In a further article published in the *Irish Times* (McCloskey, 2021), a primary school teacher suggests that there is a desire on the part of teachers and priests to separate sacramental preparation from schools. The article calls for freeing schools from the prolonged activities associated with sacramental preparation, suggesting that this would allow teachers to focus more on the academic needs of the pupils in their class. This perspective aligns with a broader trend across many dioceses in Ireland, where there is a move away from relying on schools to prepare pupils to celebrate the sacraments. This shift is evident in the Archdiocese of Dublin, where policy development strongly advocates for sacramental celebrations to be parish-led. Such policies reflect a growing movement towards increasing responsibility for sacramental preparation and celebration to the local parish community. The *CPPRECI* (IEC, 2015) and the subsequent *Grow in Love* programme include faith formation and sacramental preparation. *SGN* (IEC, 2010) is very clear about the responsibility of the parish regarding sacramental preparation and celebration. It states that sacramental preparation should involve a 'clearly defined process' which takes place in the parish. Such a parish programme serves to prepare children for the sacraments and is a process that is firmly rooted in the faith community (IEC, 2010, p. 135). 'It should be the norm then that children are initiated into the sacraments within their own faith community and in their own parish or local church.' It calls on parishes to reclaim Confirmation and First Holy Communion as parish events. (IEC, 2010, p.138) This is a clear instruction to replace practices which place the burden of preparation for the celebration of the sacrament on the school.

Teachers are bombarded with conflicting messages regarding the relevance and worth of teaching RE in schools that are part of a changed society (Dineen, 2021; Coll, 2019). The literature depicts a historical context that was greatly influenced by the Catholic Church in Ireland, where the intertwining of RE and education is demonstrated. However, growing societal trends see a move

away from traditional thinking. The literature suggests that educational priorities have evidently shifted under the influence of secularisation. RE, which was heretofore viewed as central to providing a holistic education that fostered spiritual development, now appears to be relegated to a tangential position, no longer integrated into the revised curriculum. The revised *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023) suggests that RE is no longer valued. How this policy change by the Department of Education impacts the place of RE in Catholic primary schools remains to be seen.

## 2.9 Conclusion

This literature review has attempted to establish the landscape within which this research project is undertaken. It has identified several key challenges for RE: the impact of recent curriculum policy development, the changing social context for Catholic primary schools, the management of increased diversity in classrooms, the implications of teacher commitment, the need for sustained and relevant professional development in RE for teachers and school leaders and the absence of any formal inspection or accountability mechanism for the quality of RE teaching, leaving its implementation largely unregulated. The recently published *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023) outlines the basis upon which the redeveloped primary curriculum evolves. Policymakers contend with the traditional dominance of the Catholic Church in education while endeavouring to make provision for the needs of an increasingly diverse and multifaith society. The *Primary Curriculum Framework* for *Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023) depicts RE outside the core curriculum. Furthermore, the time allocated to RE has been reduced. These changes indicate a shift in emphasis regarding RE and its place in a modern curriculum. It is evident that there is a policy change concerning the role of RE compared with the *Primary School Curriculum* of 1999. There are clear gaps in the literature around current practices in RE in Catholic primary schools as seen from the principal's vantage point and how recent changes to the presentation of RE in the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999) are viewed by Catholic primary school principals. What follows attempts to address this knowledge gap.

# Chapter 3: Methodology

## 3.1 Introduction

This research explores the perspectives of Catholic school principals who play a central role in embedding and promoting the subject of Religious Education (RE) within their schools. RE is a key expression of ethos in a Catholic primary school. The study concentrates on three primary areas of investigation: (i) principals' perspectives on the significance of RE within their schools, (ii) their experiences with current RE practices together with the factors they perceive as influencing these practices, and (iii) their interpretations of recent developments in the primary curriculum and the resulting impact on RE practices in their schools and other factors that may influence the future role of RE in their schools. This chapter addresses the research design and methods used to explore the research question. It discusses the study's theoretical foundations and philosophical assumptions and moves on to justify the choice of a constructionist interpretive paradigm as guiding the research. It also addresses how the study's methods and analytical tools align with the selected paradigm.

## 3.2 Research Paradigm

Philosophy is integral to research in social science as 'all research projects have philosophical foundations' (Hunt & Hansen, 2008, p.2). Such foundations provide clear direction so that the researcher can better situate themselves to engage more rigorously with the research project and realise 'a comprehensive world view' (Sefotho, 2015, p.29). In the context of research, the term ‘paradigm' is a philosophical concept originating from the work of Thomas Kuhn (1962), who describes it as 'an approach to research, a way of looking at or a world view' (Kuhn, 1962, p.23). Cohen et al. (2011) present the research paradigm as a belief system or theory, a way of pursuing knowledge. The ontological stance of the researcher, alongside their epistemological assumptions, directs the researcher as to how best to investigate that which needs to be investigated, which in turn leads to the methodology adopted (Slevitch, 2011). Bryman (2004) speaks of how a paradigm influences the focus of a study and dictates how research should be carried out and how results should be interpreted. A researcher's methodological process, including data collection and analysis, is predicated on the ontological and epistemological assumptions of research (Creswell,

2007). Therefore, it is evident that both ontological and epistemological assumptions must be considered before commencing any research.

### 3.2.1 Ontological Assumptions

Ontological assumptions relate to 'the nature of reality and its characteristics' (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p20). Before embarking on a research project, the researcher brings their own beliefs and values that predicate their approach to conducting the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Concerned with understanding reality, the researcher's ontological stance will determine how that reality is defined (Clark et al., 2021). Two ontological positions are identified by Clark et al. (2021): objectivism and constructionism. While objectivism is founded on a position that believes we encounter social phenomena as external facts, constructionism contends that 'social phenomena and their meanings are continually being created by social actors' (Clark et al., 2021, p. 28). The ontology that underpins this research is that of constructionism since it is clear that each principal's experience contributes uniquely to an understanding of RE and its practices in Catholic primary schools. In addition, the researcher will 'interpret participants' constructions of meaning' (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### 3.2.2 Epistemological Assumptions

Epistemology pertains to knowledge and how knowledge is produced (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Clark et al., 2021). Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) address four epistemological positions for research: post-positivism, interpretivism, critical theory and pragmatism. The first of these, post-positivism, provides an approach that involves careful observation combined with the measurement of objective reality (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Post-positivism, often referred to as the scientific method (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008), emerged in response to the positivist paradigm in social science. Positivism is a paradigm that has its basis in measurement and reason. It assumes that 'a single tangible reality exists' (Park et al., 2019, p.691). Cohen et al. (2011) argue that positivism fails when it is used to study human behaviour because human nature is complex and social phenomena are elusive and intangible. A post-positivist worldview is reductionistic, preoccupied with the reduction of ideas 'into a small discrete set to test' (Creswell & Creswell, 2023, p.8).

Interpretivism, often referred to as constructivism, focuses on understanding social phenomena by examining the subjective meanings and interpretations of individuals. Interpretivism asserts that the scientific model cannot be used to study the social world (Clark et al., 2021). In contrast to the epistemological position of positivism, which holds that social reality can be studied by employing natural science methods, interpretivism 'incorporates a wide number of perspectives and approaches to qualitative research' (Clark et al., 2021, p.24). Interpretivism aims to understand social phenomena. It is anti-positivist in that it is 'in opposition to positivism' (Ryan, 2018, p.6). It seeks to understand the subjective world of human experience (Cohen et al., 2011). Interpretive researchers acknowledge that social reality is complex and socially constructed through interactions and shared meanings (Denscombe, 2002).

Critical theory seeks to understand how dynamics shape social life and influence individuals and groups. In effect, critical theory is unquestionably prescriptive and normative. It encompasses a belief regarding what behaviour a social democracy should require (Cohen et al., 2011). The intention of critical theory is transformative. Described as 'a form of social criticism' (Thompson, 2017, p.1), it seeks to understand and critique society. It not only assesses and critiques societal issues but also inspires and enables meaningful changes and improvements. The goal of critical theory is not only to analyse but also to transform or change society through connecting thought with action (Thompson, 2017).

Finally, pragmatism emphasises the practical application of knowing and the importance of context in shaping understanding. Pragmatists are concerned with what works (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). To answer the research question, researchers adopt a method or combination of methods to 'completely understand a research problem' (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p.14). Pragmatism focuses on action, change, and the interaction between knowledge and action. This makes it suitable for research methods that involve actively intervening in the world rather than just observing it (Goldkuhl, 2012).

The epistemological position that best aligns with this research is the interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivist approaches seek to 'begin with the individual and set out to understand their interpretations of the world around them' (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 18). Interpretivism has been influenced by many traditions, and Clark et al. (2021) point to Weber's idea of Verstehen, the

hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition. This tradition asserts that 'social action is meaningful to those involved and therefore needs to be interpreted from their point of view' (Clark et al., 2021, p.26).

This research draws on the tradition of Verstehen and phenomenology, as it primarily focuses on how 'individuals make sense of the world around them' (Clark et al., 2021, p. 25). This aligns well with the researcher's intention to endeavour to unearth the views of principals based on their own experiences of RE at a time when the *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023) sees a change in emphasis regarding the place of RE when compared with its treatment in the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999).

### 3.3 Research Approach

Having considered the philosophical underpinnings of the research, it is next the responsibility of the researcher to identify the most appropriate research approach, which will allow for a rigorous study of the situation under analysis (Queirós et al., 2017). This study is consistent with qualitative research as qualitative research aims to obtain 'detailed descriptions or evaluations of current practice' (Flick, 2006, p. 136). A qualitative researcher studies 'things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p.3). In contrast, as described by Bryman (2004), quantitative research, which is underpinned by scientific principles, ignores the fact that people interpret their own reality or world differently from each other. According to Smeyers (2008), our interpretation and understanding of human reality is constant and is influenced by our values. Through this lens, no causal explanation of human behaviour can be separated from this background of shared understanding, nor can it be reduced to numeric data or statistical analysis. Quantitative research methods also fail to manage the complexity of certain social contexts or settings. Educational settings are very complex and, as such, are subject to independent variables influenced by all that contribute to this complex environment (Salomon, 1991). This is further complicated by the fact that a quantitative positivist epistemology presupposes that it is possible to separate facts from values (Slevitch, 2011). Any analysis of the relationship between variables cannot possibly reflect the ever-changing and complex relationships between people (Bryman, 2004). The subjectivity of each individual's interactions with their environment is not represented in numerical data. Instead, it reflects a sense of a static social world, which, in reality, is anything but static.

In qualitative research, the process is inductive (Clark et al., 2021). Inductive reasoning focuses on exploration, which allows theories and explanations to emerge from the data in an open-ended manner as opposed to testing a theory that already exists. Through qualitative enquiry, the researcher endeavours to understand the subjective world of human experience by being directly involved rather than merely observing (Cohen et al., 2011). It respects the differences between people, where the researcher interprets the actions of human beings and the social world within which they live from the person's point of view (Bryman, 2004). Qualitative research takes account of the 'rapid social change and the resulting diversification of life worlds' as the aim of qualitative research is to obtain 'detailed descriptions or evaluations of current practice' (Flick, 2006). A qualitative approach is most appropriate for this research as it allows for 'a complex detailed understanding' of the research question. Such details can only be found through engaging in conversations directly with individuals. This allows participants to tell their stories (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 45). The primary reason for adopting a qualitative research method is that this study is exploratory and will provide a rich and detailed exploration of principals' views. The constructionist interpretive paradigm, which underpins this research, aligns with qualitative research as the researcher 'seeks to listen to participants and build an understanding based on what they hear' (Creswell & Creswell, 2023, p. 29).

Critics of qualitative research suggest it is too subjective, difficult to replicate, has limited scope and lacks transparency. Guba and Lincoln (1994) propose two main evaluative criteria for addressing such criticism- namely, trustworthiness and authenticity. Trustworthiness, as described by Clark et al. (2021), encompasses four criteria that must be incorporated into qualitative research. The first is credibility. Credibility involves fostering confidence in the truth of the findings. This research devotes considerable time to building rapport with each participant. During the analysis phase, meticulous care will be taken to reflect the participants' experiences and perspectives accurately. The second is transferability. Transferability pertains to demonstrating the applicability of findings to other contexts. Contextual information will be recorded to facilitate connections to other primary school settings where appropriate. The third is dependability. Dependability addresses the consistency and replicability of findings. Clarity will be maintained throughout each phase of the research process. The use of NVivo software will ensure that all phases of the data analysis process are thoroughly documented. The final criterion is confirmability. Confirmability assesses the extent to which findings are influenced by researcher bias, motivation, or interest. The

researcher will reflect on their background as a principal to consider potential influences on the study. Feedback and questions from supervisors will provide opportunities to justify the analysis and interpretation of the data. To ensure overall trustworthiness, thick descriptions will be employed, allowing others to judge the potential transferability of findings to other settings (Clark et al., 2021). To ensure authenticity in this research project, Purposeful Sampling will be employed to include different viewpoints. The principals that will be selected will have more than five years of experience as principals in a Catholic primary school in Ireland. Additionally, consideration will be given to school type and setting in order to capture a range of viewpoints and experiences. It is envisaged that there will be participants who are administrative principals[7] and teaching principals, male and female, from large urban schools and small rural schools, mainstream schools[8] and gaelscoileanna[9] included in the study. Such sampling also allows for representatives from a range of different dioceses to participate. Ethical approval, which is necessary for authenticity, will be sought and granted prior to the commencement of the study. Having outlined the chosen qualitative research approach, the next step is to consider the research methodology which best suits the research question.

### 3.4 Research Methodology

In an effort to select the most appropriate research methodology for this study, a variety of qualitative research methodologies were considered. Each one offers distinct approaches to understanding the perspectives of research participants. Initially, phenomenology seemed a suitable option, as it focuses on capturing the essence of individuals' lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). However, the nature of this research is not so much about capturing lived experiences in an embodied sense but rather garnering principals' opinions and reflections. As such, phenomenology was not deemed appropriate in this instance. Another possibility was ethnography, which would have allowed for an in-depth observation of school culture and practices regarding RE over an extended period (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). However, given the focus on principals' opinions rather than daily interactions, ethnography was less appropriate for

[7] In Ireland, a primary school usually has an administrative principal when it has 9 or more mainstream teachers or two or more special classes. An administrative principal generally has no teaching role in the school, they engage in leadership and administrative work.

[8] A mainstream primary school in Ireland is a school that is open to all children, including those with and without special educational needs.

[9] A Gaelscoil is an Irish medium school in Ireland where all the teaching is done through the Irish language.

the study's aims. The researcher also considered Grounded theory useful for developing theories from participants' responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). However, since the goal of the research was not to generate a new theory but to explore specific experiences and contextual factors, grounded theory proved less suitable.

In contrast to the above methodologies, a multiple case study design appeared to offer the most appropriate choice as it is a recognised qualitative approach for investigation real-life cases (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). In this instance, it allows for the selection of cases to result in a detailed, contextual analysis of principals' unique perspectives within their respective schools (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This approach aligns well with the study's objective, allowing for a rich understanding of each principal's experience and opinions while drawing out commonalities among participants' responses.

Cresswell and Poth (2018) suggest a five-phase process to ensure a case study's systematic rigor and validity:

Phase 1 – Determine if a case study approach is appropriate

Phase 2 – Identify the case/s

Phase 3 – Data Collection

Phase 4 – Data Analysis

Phase 5 – Interpreting and Reporting Findings

### 3.4.1 Phase: 1 Determine if a case study approach is appropriate

The first phase involves ascertaining if the particular case study approach to be adopted is the most appropriate way of investigating the research question. A multiple case study design is particularly suited for examining real-life situations within natural contexts, such as the social, cultural, and educational environments of Catholic primary schools in Ireland. An advantage of the multiple case study design, according to Ashley (2021), is that it is potentially a stronger method than the single case design. However, they can call for more time and resources to complete.

By engaging with a 'unique example of real people in real situations' (Cohen et al., 2011), the methodology enables a comprehensive exploration of current practices in RE while facilitating the comparison of distinguishing characteristic across cases (Clark et al., 2021). This comparative

strategy supports an evaluation of the principals' views on the potential effect of recent developments in RE. Denscombe (2010) describes that the primary strength of the multiple case study is that it allows the researcher to employ a variety of sources, data, and methods in their investigations. With this type of study, a number of different school types can be included. Despite criticisms that multiple case studies might prioritise cross-case comparisons over unique contextual factors (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991), this research mitigates such risks by maintaining a strong focus on context-specific details. The flexibility of this methodology allows for integrating multiple data sources, such as interviews, to identify patterns and variations among cases. Consequently, this approach provides a robust framework for addressing the research questions.

In short, a multiple or collective case study was considered the most suitable approach for this research as it allows the researcher to generate in-depth data from experienced primary school principals in Catholic schools. As discussed in Chapter 1, principals of Catholic primary schools are well placed to offer detailed descriptions about the place of RE in their schools and the impact recent developments may potentially have on RE practices in their schools.

### 3.4.2 Phase 2: Identifying the Case/s

The second phase in Creswell and Poth's framework is to choose the cases and to adopt an appropriate method of sampling. It is felt that it is appropriate to focus on principal teachers as the cases in this research. In Catholic primary schools, the principal is responsible for the daily management and leadership of the school, including maintaining a positive school culture and ensuring a consistent approach to RE aligned with the school's ethos. Principals play a crucial role in influencing the school environment, the implementation of RE, and the allocation of resources towards religious practices. Studies indicate that principals significantly impact school culture, especially in response to social changes and maintaining inclusive, denominational schools (Khalifa et al., 2016; Byrne & Devine, 2017). Whether or not the principal places an emphasis on the promotion of the Catholic ethos through the allocation of resources and advancement of practices determines the whole school's success in maintaining the ethos of a school. Given their central role, principals are well-positioned to offer insights into current RE practices and how future changes introduced in the *Primary Curriculum Framework* (2023) might affect the maintenance of the Catholic ethos in their schools. Therefore, this research focuses on gathering principals' views in Catholic primary schools.

### 3.4.3 Sampling

Selecting a sampling method entailed considering a range of methods and choosing the one most appropriate to the present study. As a practising primary school principal herself, with experience in other research initiatives in the participant role, this researcher was sensitive to the busy demands of principals and wanted to ensure that suitable participants with relevant experience were secured and that the study would be viable. For example, it is important that participating principals have worked for more than five years in the role of principal of a Catholic school so that they would be fully aware of the traditions of a Catholic school and how current developments might impact them. There were perceived merits in many approaches. Random sampling as an approach was considered for its potential to enhance representativeness (Creswell & Creswell, 2018); however, it was ultimately dismissed as it would not necessarily yield participants with the specific knowledge and experiences relevant to the focus of this study. Snowball Sampling was also evaluated. It entails identifying cases of interest from 'people who know people who know what cases are information-rich' (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.159). While applicable in some studies, this method was deemed unsuitable here as it could introduce biases based on participants' networks and could risk limiting the diversity of perspectives. Finally, Purposeful Sampling, which involves selecting participants who are particularly knowledgeable about RE and can provide in-depth, context-specific insights, aligns well with the study's objectives. It is a strategy that ensures that participants 'inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study' (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 236). The intention was to purposefully select 'participants or sites (or documents or visual material) that would best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question' (Creswell, 2014, p.189). Furthermore, Coe (2021, p.54) recommends Purposeful Sampling as it allows researchers to 'describe a particular context in rich detail, to make sense of the interpretations and constructions that people in that context make and analyse them in ways that promote insightful and deep understanding.' Thus, Purposeful Sampling was used to engage a range of principals from different school types, for example, urban/rural, Gaelscoil/English speaking, DEIS[10] school/Non DEIS school. The proposed participants for this research are principals who have worked for over 5 years as principals of a Catholic primary

[10] In Ireland, a DEIS school refers to a school that is part of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme. Led by the Department of Education, it is an initiative which is aimed at addressing educational disadvantage. DEIS schools are provided with additional resources and supports to help students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds succeed in education.

school. Such participants are described by Cohen et al. (2011, p. 157) as 'those who have in-depth knowledge', which allows us to acquire 'in-depth information from those who are in a position to give it.' As this is small-scale research, it was hoped that the variability in school location, school type and school demographic, as demonstrated in Table 3.1, would increase the likelihood of variability of attitudes and perspectives. Participants were recruited through the Department of Education website, where schools are listed, and principal contact details are widely available. Ten principals from ten different Catholic schools around Ireland were chosen. The geographical spread, as depicted in Figure 3.1 below, allowed the researcher to acquire data about the different practices in schools and the varying degree to which the parish and diocese influence the importance attributed to RE and practices in RE.

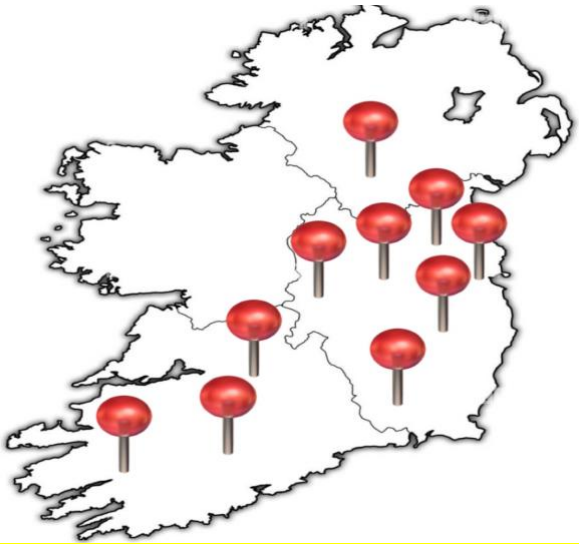

*Figure 3.1. Map of Ireland showing the geographical spread of schools involved in the study*

Table 3.1 School profiles

| ID Number | School Type | Size of school based on Enrolment figures | Province | Participant Gender |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| P1 | Urban | Large | Leinster | Male |
| P2 | Urban | Medium | Leinster | Male |
| P3 | Rural | Small | Leinster | Female |
| P4 | Urban | Medium | Munster | Female |
| P5 | Rural | Medium | Leinster | Female |
| P6 | Urban | Large | Leinster | Female |
| P7 | Urban Junior School | Medium | Leinster | Female |
| P8 | Urban | Large | Munster | Male |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| P9 | Rural | Small | Ulster | Female |
| P10 | Urban Gaelscoil | Large | Munster | Male |

### 3.4.4 Phase 3: Data Collection

The third phase in Creswell and Poth's procedure for case study research sees the development of procedures to conduct the data collection phase of the research. This study took the form of semi-structured interviews, as through engaging in individual, semi-structured interviews, it was possible to gain insight into individual principals' views. Initially, the participants' understanding of the term ethos was explored. Ethos in practice was discussed to establish whether participants considered RE as an expression of ethos in their school. Following this, participants' experiences of current practices around RE in their schools and their perception of the factors that influence those practices were considered. Finally, how principals perceive recent developments in the primary curriculum impacting the practices of RE in their schools were examined.

Semi-structured interviews facilitate an in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions and interactions with their environment. In semi-structured interviews, initial questions are frequently open, thus allowing for further probing to gain the necessary insights. The result is a very flexible process (Bryman, 2004; Opie, 2008). Flick (2006) also highlights how the semi-structured interview, through its open design, allows the interviewee to express their viewpoint in a less formal setting. Flick (2006) suggests that the semi-structured interview process should encompass three forms of questions. *Open questions* are suggested to gain insight into the knowledge and understanding of the interviewee; *theory-driven questions*, where the questions are based on the researcher's own 'theoretical presuppositions; and *confrontational questions*, which allow the researcher to review the theories and relations presented by the interviewee (ibid 2006). According to Bryman (2004), qualitative interviews are flexible and allow the interviewer to respond to 'the direction in which interviewees take the interview' while also allowing the interviewer to 'adjust the emphasis in the research as a result of the significant issues that emerge in the course of interviews' (Bryman, 2004, p.320). As highlighted by Denscombe (2014), interviews are worth the time and effort involved as they allow the researcher to examine subtle phenomena, including opinions, feelings, and experiences, in greater detail.

Conducting interviews for school personnel positions is a frequent responsibility for this researcher as a school principal and a trained independent assessor. While this experience confers certain

advantages, such as the capacity to establish rapport and the ability to create optimal interview conditions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 115), it is also important to acknowledge that the research aims to uncover 'a special type of information' (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 108). Interviews, for the purpose of research, are more than just conversations and should never be considered an easy option according to Mears (2009). Cohen et al., (2011) advise that when seeking to gain insights into how 'individuals view the world, ' more qualitative unstructured interviewing is appropriate (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 412). According to Cohen et al. (2011), semi-structured interviews allow for greater flexibility. As each school setting presents a unique context, it is important to incorporate flexibility into each interview. Such interviews require much consideration and planning. Indeed, in order for the data collected to allow for 'insightful analysis', which in turn results in 'defensible findings', then the interviews need to be a well-envisioned design, with a great deal of preparation, purposeful conduct and attentive listening (Mears 2009 p.233). Participants were asked to agree to participate in an interview (in person or via the virtual Zoom platform) that is approximately 45 minutes in duration. All participants are part of the researcher's wider Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA) professional network. Contact details are available from the Department of Education website. A list of the interview questions was provided to participants prior to the interview (see Appendix D). All interviews were arranged for a day and time suitable to the participant. A number of the interviews were held face-to-face. For the face-to-face interviews, the researcher and participant agreed on an appropriate setting, convenient to the participant. The setting needed to be private, where the interview could proceed without interruptions. Participants were not required to answer any questions they did not wish to answer. Each interview was recorded on the researcher's Apple iPhone. This recording was transferred to a password-protected file on the researcher's password-protected computer immediately after the interview and deleted from the mobile phone.

Pilot interviews were held in April 2023, and the remainder were conducted in June 2023. Recordings were transcribed in July 2023 by the researcher. All data collected was treated confidentially, within the usual legal limitations and university requirements. The process of pseudonymisation was applied to the data. All participants were pseudonymised by the assignment of a code; the details associated with such codes were stored in a password-protected document on a password-protected computer in the researcher's home, known only to the researcher and supervisors.

Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to gain a rich insight into the participants' views, experiences, and understanding of RE and the practices of RE in their individual schools. The investigation centred on three core areas: principals' perspectives on the importance of RE which is an aspect of ethos, their experiences with current RE practices and the factors they perceive as influencing these practices. It also provided the researcher the opportunity to draw on their views of the potential impact recent developments might have.

#### 3.4.4.1 Using Zoom

A number of the interviews were held using the online platform Zoom which facilitated a greater geographical spread of participants. The use of Zoom also proved to be economical in terms of both time and cost. There is general agreement that there is no real difference in the quality of the interviews online or in person (Gray et al., 2020; Howlett, 2022). Lobe et al. (2020, p.5) suggest that 'most of the fundamental ethical issues in online interviewing are the same as face-to-face contexts.'

Zoom is the online platform employed in the research project as it has several advantages associated with its use. Zoom does not require participants to have an account or download a specific programme (Lobe et al., 2020; Gray et al., 2020). It allows for password protection, and there is an option for a waiting room feature. This means the researcher, as host, can check participants prior to letting them join the meeting. Lobe et al. (2020, p.5) point out that by using Zoom, 'voluntary withdrawal can be easily accomplished simply by disconnecting.' Regarding recording the interview, Lobe et al. (2020, p. 5) also suggest that while only the researcher can record the interview, it is important to make explicit the "prohibition on recording" by the participant in the initial stages of gaining consent. It was necessary to test the Zoom platform before the interview while being transparent with participants about what they needed to know to participate in a Zoom interview, such as using headphones or virtual backgrounds. A direct link to include necessary passwords was emailed to participants in advance of the meeting. The DCU Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval for the use of Zoom and face-to-face interviews. When using Zoom, DCU is considered the data controller. As this researcher is considered an employee of the data controller, all data protection rules and obligations under GDPR needed to be met.

#### 3.4.4.2 Pilot interviews

Clark et al. (2021) recommend piloting interviews. Described as a practice run, pilot interviews are an invaluable tool to help identify any problems or shortcomings concerning the interviewing process. Initially, two pilot interviews were conducted, one of which was on Zoom. They provided an excellent opportunity to trial using Zoom and recording the interviews.

Following the pilot interviews, some alterations were made to the order and wording of the questions e.g. the original inquiry regarding whether the *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland* (IEC, 2015) was reflected in the school RE policy was modified to a more open-ended question concerning the principals' awareness of the document. This adjustment aimed to capture broader insights. The pilot semi-structured interviews proved very useful and allowed for a more relaxed interview experience for the remainder of the interviews.

### 3.5 Phase 4: Data analysis

The fourth phase in the procedures for conducting Case study research, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), is analysis. This stage of the process involves the analysis of the data collected. Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis method was used to analyse the transcripts generated from the semi-structured interviews. This form of analysis allows for a systematic and flexible approach to identifying themes or patterns in the data collected. Its popularity is attributed to its 'theoretical and methodological transparency' (Clark et al., 2021, p.3) and this flexibility allows it to be used over a range of theoretical frameworks and research paradigms (Braun & Clarke, 2017). Braun and Clarke's (2022) analysis method comprises of a six-step process.

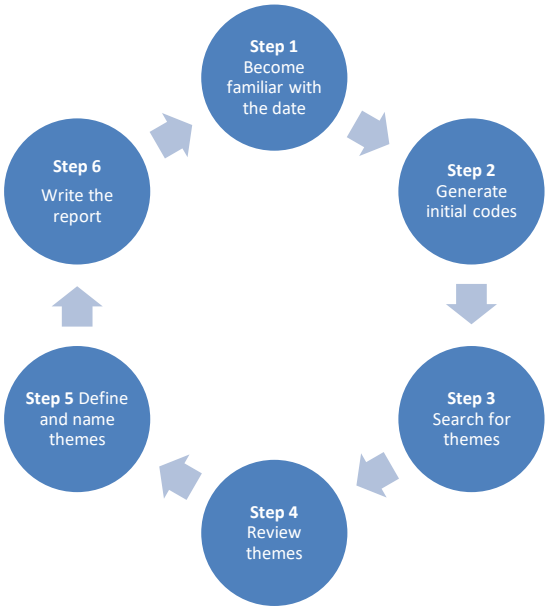


*Figure 3.2. Braun & Clarke's six-step framework for doing a thematic analysis from Braun and Clarke, 2022*

Through thematic analysis, patterns or themes are identified. The qualitative analysis software used in this study was NVivo a software programme used for qualitative research. NVivo accommodates audio, video, and text data analysis gathered through interviews, focus groups, surveys, social media, and journal articles. The significant advantage associated with using NVivo is the logging mechanism, which enables the researcher to generate an audit trail and allows for the analytical process to be transparent throughout.

**Step 1: Familiarising yourself with the dataset**

The first step in the process of analysis involved transcribing all the interviews accurately, ensuring that participants' language, tone, and intent were preserved. Each transcript was cross-checked against the original audio to confirm accuracy. This process involved uploading each transcript to NVivo and creating a folder. Participants were given unique identifiers in order to preserve anonymity. Participants became known as P1, P2 and so on. The researcher must become very familiar with the responses given by participants in the semi-structured interviews. Each transcript was read and reread. At this stage, the objective is to become familiar with the principals' responses and identify emerging themes.

**Step 2: Coding**

Thematic analysis 'provides accessible and systematic procedures for generating codes and themes from qualitative data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.297). At this point, possible themes were highlighted, and codes were generated. Depending on the codes established, it is necessary to group similar codes together. To facilitate data analysis, similar themes or topics were grouped together and coded. Referred to in NVivo as open coding, patterns or hierarchies are not developed at this stage. Using NVivo enabled more efficient management of the data collected from the semi-structured interviews conducted in this study. Figure 3.3 below illustrates the early stages of analysis, which involved generating initial codes. These codes were further refined and narrowed down as the analysis progressed.

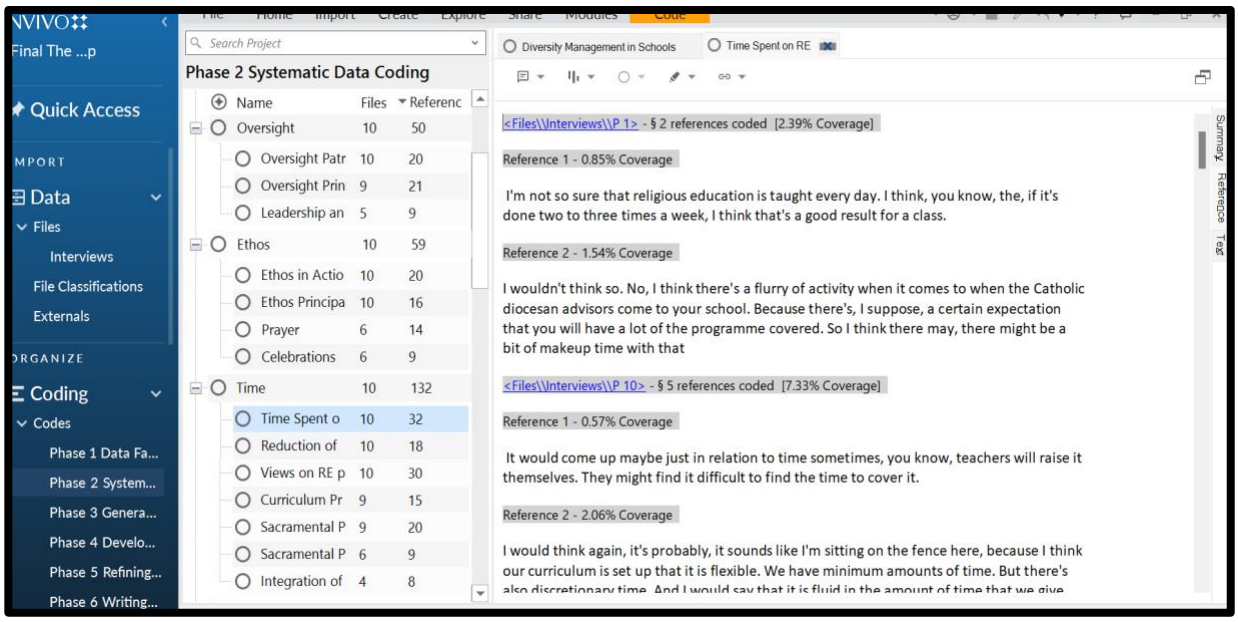


*Figure 3.3. Step 2 of Thematic Analysis*

**Step 3: Generating Initial Themes**

Following from the codes generated in step 2, the researcher moves to generating categories by grouping related codes. This involved grouping codes into possible themes and compiling all relevant data for each potential theme. A total of approximately 50 initial codes were identified. Following this initial coding, thematically related codes were clustered into broader categories. Using constant comparison techniques, early codes were revisited, redefined, and regrouped. This process involved ongoing interaction between data, codes, and emerging themes.

**Step 4: Developing and reviewing themes**

This step involves generating themes through continued analysis of the codes generated in step 3. The researcher actively produces themes; they do not 'passively emerge' (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.8). Saturation was approached from the perspective of *meaning saturation*, consistent with reflexive thematic analysis. It was determined that new data no longer yielded novel insights after the eighth interview. The final two interviews served to confirm, rather than expand, the existing thematic structure. Through refinement and categorisation, the number was reduced to 20 higher order codes. Final themes emerged from clustering related codes.

Themes were included if they:

- Demonstrated consistency across multiple participants,
- Offered conceptual or interpretive insight,
- Aligned with the central research questions.

For instance, the theme *"Wellbeing and RE"* was retained despite having fewer coded references due to its potential meaning and practical significance to the future of RE.

**Step 5: Refining, defining and naming themes**

This phase entails data reduction. Analysis is ongoing to refine each theme's specifics, generating clear definitions and names for each theme. As shown in Figure 3.4 below, using NVivo at this stage of the process involved reviewing the initial themes generated in the previous step and deciding whether a theme could be more specific, if some themes could be grouped together under one parent theme, or if some themes needed to be changed completely. Data reduction continued throughout this phase, with the goal of generating distinct, well-defined themes grounded in the dataset. NVivo was instrumental in visually mapping and redefining the thematic structure during this analytic refinement.

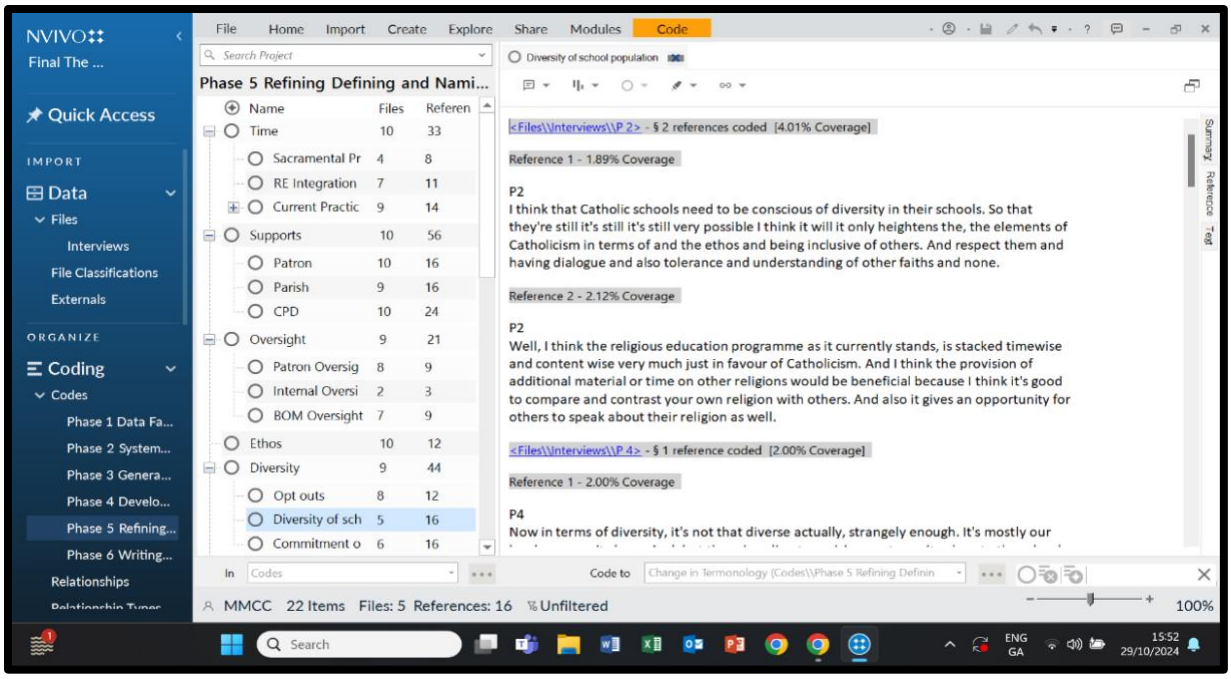


*Figure 3.4. Step 5 of Thematic Analysis*

**Step 6: Writing up**

In step 6 the themes are finalised and organised into a coherent narrative. Using NVivo software at this stage enhances the clarity and rigour of this final step by providing structured, organised themes and subthemes, supported by direct data extracts from the semi-structured interviews. NVivo's features enable researchers to efficiently retrieve and review coded data, ensuring that each theme is robustly supported by evidence from the data set. This process allows the researcher to develop a cohesive, well-evidenced narrative, facilitating a clearer presentation of insights and strengthening the overall impact of the thematic analysis.

Table 3.2. Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006) relating the analytical process to Data analysis

| **Analytical Process Braun and Clarke, 2022** | **Practical applications in NVivo** |
|---|---|
| Step 1: Familiarising yourself with the data | Cycle 1:<br>Transcribing Data. Reading and re-reading the data noting down initial ideas. Import the data into the NVivo data management tool |
| Step 2: Systematic data coding | Cycle 2: |

| | |
|---|---|
| | Open coding – Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic way across the entire data set, collecting data relevant to each potential theme |
| Step 3: Generating initial themes from coded and collated data | Cycle 3:<br>Categorising of codes – Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme. |
| Step 4: Developing and reviewing themes | Cycle 4:<br>Coding on – Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set. |
| Step 5: Refining, defining and naming themes | Cycle 5:<br>Data reduction – On-going analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating definitions and names for each theme. |
| Step 6: Writing the report | Cycle 6: Generating memos in NVivo. Serving as a reflective tool to think critically about the data, offering insights into why certain themes emerged or interrelate.<br>Cycle 7: Rigorous examination of each theme and its supporting data to ensure that the analysis is consistent, reliable, and grounded in the interview data<br>Cycle 8: The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a report of the analysis. |

### 3.6 Phase 5: Interpreting and Reporting Findings

Interpreting the data is the final phase of a case study methodology, as described by Creswell and Poth (2018). It can be reported and communicated by interpreting the data and drawing meaningful conclusions. The descriptions that evolve from a reflective process must be organised with readers in mind (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.101). The findings are brought into conversation with the relevant literature to answer the research questions. The proceeding chapter will discuss the research findings in depth.

### 3.7 Reliability and validity in qualitative research

The credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research are susceptible to scrutiny, potentially casting doubt on its reliability and validity. To mitigate this concern, the researcher needs to include: 'fidelity to real life, context- and situation- specificity, authenticity, comprehensiveness, detail, honesty, depth of response and meaningfulness to the respondents' (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 203-203). The researcher can employ strategies to strengthen the validity, such as triangulation, member checking, spending prolonged time in the field and using an external auditor (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). For this research, two strategies were most appropriate. The first is using rich, thick descriptions to convey the findings. Furnishing multiple perspectives about a theme ensures that the knowledge uncovered becomes richer and more realistic.

This study also endeavoured to demonstrate reflexivity and transparency. Reflexivity is important for researchers to ensure validity. A reflexive approach strengthens the reliability and validity of the study by ensuring that the themes generated are grounded in participants' responses rather than influenced by the researcher's own views. Reflexivity occurs when the researcher reflects upon themselves and their experiences throughout the research project. Since the researcher is also a principal, maintaining reflexivity throughout the research process can help minimise bias and enhance the credibility of the findings. Taking into account that 'the researcher's positioning inevitably shapes their research and engagement with data' (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.14) at each stage of the study, the researcher routinely took time to reflect upon the 'assumptions, expectations, choices and actions' during the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.14). This can be achieved by including notes that clarify any potential bias the researcher may have, which will influence interpretations. As a teaching principal in a Catholic primary school, the researcher's background and experiences undoubtedly influenced how the views of other principals were interpreted. Setting aside personal beliefs and experiences that could influence how data is interpreted, helped the researcher remain open to participants' unique viewpoints. Furthermore, seeking feedback from peers or advisors, especially those who may not share the researcher's background, challenged interpretations and broadened perspectives. Braun and Clarke (2022) argue that reflexive thematic analysis produces a robust process. By adopting reflexivity in the thematic analysis process, mistakes are accepted as learning and inform our practice moving forward (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

### 3.8 Ethics

Participation in this research project was entirely voluntary, a fact which was explicitly communicated to all participants. The right to withdraw consent at any point during the research was also clearly explained to all participants. Upon the study's conclusion, participants will receive a comprehensive report of the research findings and recommendations. It is hoped that the process will facilitate personal reflection and learning among participants. This study involved ethical considerations, particularly in eliciting principals' perspectives regarding their understanding of ethos within their schools and the significance of RE as a foundational element of the school's ethos. The ethical dimensions were carefully considered, especially concerning the nature of the questions posed to participants, which probed into the moral values and principles upheld by the principals and their influence on the leadership of their respective school communities. Notably, the inquiry did not seek personal information; the questions primarily focused on implementing the Catholic RE curriculum as an aspect of the Catholic school ethos.

#### 3.8.1 Positionality

It must be acknowledged that the self as a researcher influences how qualitative data is produced and interpreted (Denscombe, 2010). Personal identity, values and beliefs cannot be avoided entirely through the research process. Researchers who adopt a qualitative approach 'need to position themselves in their writing' (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.229). Researchers construct the writing that comes from the data collected. This writing builds upon the researcher's own interpretation, which is situated in the 'cultural, social, gender, class and personal politics' brought to the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.228). This insider knowledge and understanding is an elite position the researcher occupies as it enables them to benefit from increased levels of participant trust and openness (Clark et al., 2021).

As a primary school principal with twenty-one years of experience in a Catholic primary school, this researcher is placed in an insider position within this research. The researchers' personal experience provides for an implicit knowledge and understanding of the contexts and interactions detailed by participants. It means that the researcher has a greater understanding of the context and language associated with RE and ethos in Catholic primary schools. Such levels of detail would have required further clarification or elaboration by participants had the researcher approached the

research question from an outsider position. However, the researcher's insider position also creates challenges and potential biases. There is a chance that such an extensive emersion in the Catholic education system might predispose the researcher to certain assumptions, beliefs and values that could influence how the data is interpreted. It also leaves the research vulnerable to the privileging of particular perspectives or the ignoring of dissenting opinions. To counteract any adverse outcomes from the researcher's positionality, a reflexive stance was adopted that ensured the researcher critically engaged with their potential for bias throughout the research journey. Transparency was fostered by clearly articulating the researcher's background and awareness of potential conflicts of interest. Acknowledging the researcher's positionality enhanced transparency and rigour throughout the research process.

### 3.9 Conclusion

This study provides a snapshot of the current practice regarding RE as described by ten principals in various Catholic school settings around Ireland. The investigation focused on three primary areas: principals' perspectives on the significance of RE in their schools, their experiences with the current implementation of RE and the factors influencing these practices, and their interpretations of recent curriculum changes, along with the potential implications these may have for RE practices. This chapter described the research design, the method adopted for data collection and the process used to analyse that data. The chapter that follows will set out the findings from these processes.

# Chapter 4: Findings

## 4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to give a voice to principals' perspectives regarding RE, a key aspect of ethos, amidst evolving curriculum developments. Principals are well placed as leaders to offer insight into what is happening regarding RE in Catholic primary schools.

This research focuses attention on three main areas of investigation:

- Principals' perspectives on the importance of RE.
- Principals' experiences of current practices around RE in their schools and their perception of the factors that influence those practices.
- How principals perceive recent curriculum developments will impact the practices of RE in their schools.

Interviews were conducted with ten principals to explore these issues. Table 4.1 serves as a reminder of some demographical information about the principals involved in this study:

Table 4.1. Demographics of participants

| ID | Gender | School Type | Province | School Size |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| P.1 | Male | Urban | Leinster | Large |
| P.2 | Male | Urban | Leinster | Medium |
| P.3 | Female | Rural | Leinster | Small |
| P.4 | Female | Urban | Munster | Medium |
| P.5 | Female | Urban | Leinster | Medium |
| P.6 | Female | Urban | Leinster | Large |
| P.7 | Female | Urban/Junior School | Leinster | Medium |
| P.8 | Male | Urban | Munster | Large |
| P.9 | Female | Rural | Ulster | Small |
| P.10 | Male | Urban/Gaelscoil | Munster | Large |

This chapter presents the findings following from the data analysis process under six main themes and fifteen sub-themes. These are presented in the table below and are subsequently elaborated.

Table 4.2 Themes and sub-themes emerging from data analysis

| Theme: **PERSPECTIVES ON RE'S IMPORTANCE: A SPECTRUM** | |
|---|---|
| Sub-theme | RE as an aspect of Ethos |
| Sub-theme | Initial responses to the importance of RE |

| | |
|---|---|
| | |
| Theme: **TIME** | |
| Sub-theme | Current Practice |
| Sub-theme | Integration |
| Sub-theme | Sacramental Preparation |
| | |
| Theme: **DIVERSITY** | |
| Sub-theme | Diversity of student population |
| Sub-theme | Management of opt outs |
| Sub-theme | Teachers' faith commitment and RE |
| | |
| Theme: **SUPPORTS FOR RE** | |
| Sub-theme | Support from the parish |
| Sub-theme | Support from the Patron |
| Sub-theme | Continuing Professional Development |
| | |
| Theme: **OVERSIGHT OF RE** | |
| Sub-theme | In-school oversight |
| Sub-theme | Board of management oversight |
| Sub-theme | Patron oversight |
| | |
| Theme: **THE IMPACT OF CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENTS** | |
| Sub-theme | Reduction in time |
| Sub-theme | A change in terminology |

### 4.2 Theme: Perspectives on RE's Importance: A Spectrum

| 4.2 Theme: Perspectives on RE's Importance: A Spectrum |
|---|
| 4.2 1 Sub theme: RE as an aspect of Ethos |
| 4.2.2 Sub theme: Initial responses to the importance of RE |

#### 4.2.1 RE as an aspect of ethos

Initially, the participants were invited to share their understanding of the term ethos and how it influences daily life in their schools. Gathering insights from principals on school ethos offers essential context for understanding participants' perceptions of the role and place of RE. This

foundational perspective is important for forming conclusions about how RE is perceived and the importance afforded RE. As demonstrated by the word cloud in Figure 4.1, which was generated using the terminology used by participants, there was a broad variation in the language used to describe ethos and its manifestation in their respective schools.


*Figure 4.1. Word cloud depicting vocabulary used to describe ethos.*

Interactions were mentioned by 40% of participants, while culture was mentioned by 50%. One participant described ethos as '*what you feel, and you see when you walk in the door'* (P9). 40% of participants referred to ethos as a feeling, while 30% described an atmosphere in the school to explain ethos. P.3 described how '*from literally walking from the car park in, the ethos, you can sense it, the minute you come into a school, it is collaborative among all staff. You create an atmosphere in school.'* P.4. related the atmosphere created in the school to '*the values and beliefs that a school supports'*. 60% of the participants related ethos to values, three of whom specifically mentioned Christian values. For example, P.5 described ethos as '*why we do what we do, motivated by the teaching of Christian values and by the person of Jesus Christ'* (P.5). Another participant defined these values as *'love, justice, inclusion, respect'* (P.2). 40% of the participants referred to respect as a key aspect of ethos, and 30% mentioned respect for diversity. For instance, P.9 mentioned fairness, equality, dignity and respect as central to the school's ethos. P.6 suggested that the school's ethos was *'very much about inclusion, respect for others, and diversity.'* Sacramental preparation was also included by 40% of participants when describing ethos in action in their

school. One participant stated that sacramental preparation was 'a *huge part of and a huge occasion in the life of the school'* (P.1).

Focusing specifically on participants' inclusion of RE as an aspect of ethos, while the Catholic Schools Partnership (2015) identifies RE as integral to school ethos, only 30% of the ten principals interviewed in this research mentioned RE when discussing their school's ethos. Where RE was mentioned as a feature of ethos, P.2 framed it as a '*traditional*' component of the school's ethos. Meanwhile, P.6 acknowledged the time commitment devoted to the RE programme, noting it receives '*quite a lot of work*,' however, according to this participant, so does Social, Personal Health Education to develop '*appropriate interactions and care for each other.*' P.3 indicated that RE was well supported in the school, describing how one annual staff meeting is '*dedicated to the Grow in Love programme*,' allowing teachers to collaborate on its implementation. 70% of participants did not mention RE when talking about the ethos of their school.

### 4.2.2 Initial responses around the importance of RE

Participants were asked to rank the importance of teaching RE in the lives of the pupils in their schools. The responses from principals reveal a spectrum of perspectives on the significance of RE as depicted below in Figure 4.2.

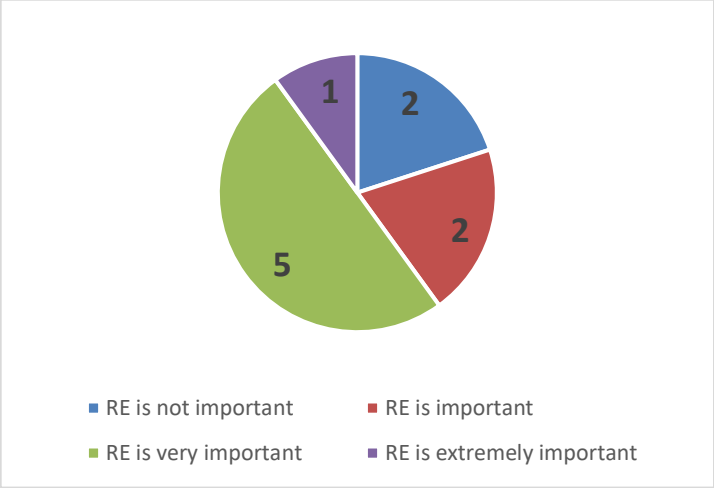


*Figure 4.2. Participants' rating of the importance of RE*

Ratings for the importance of RE were diverse. P.2, P.5, and P.10 rated RE highly, with ratings ranging from 7 to 10. In contrast, P.3 and P6 provided lower ratings of 5 and 6, indicating doubts about its current relevance or effectiveness. P.2, P.5, P.8, and P.10 believe that RE provides students with essential values like respect, tolerance, kindness, and forgiveness. Similarly, P.10

rated RE's importance highly, giving it a 9 or 10, emphasising RE's contributions to resilience, right and wrong judgment, and forgiveness. P.5 and P.10, who gave RE high ratings, argued that teaching faith is important as it instils a sense of a higher purpose and helps children develop coping mechanisms for life's challenges. P.1 described the relevance of RE's '*good traditional positive messages,*' suggesting that such teachings provide pupils with foundational moral guidance. Similarly, P.10 described RE as fostering resilience and forgiveness, aligning it with restorative practices. P.10 also believed that RE offers pupils a '*sense of being'* and a connection to '*something greater than us'*. P.5 and P.8 highlighted the role of RE in nurturing faith as a 'gift' and a *'coping mechanism*.' P.5 argued that even if children do not remain practising Catholics, RE imparts a sense of spiritual support, teaching them that '*God will always be there*.' This aligns with P.8's perspective that RE provides solace in a world of increasing societal pressures, teaching children that they are loved and valued regardless of their achievements or status. P.5 described RE as planting a *'seed'* of faith that could later become a resource for students, even if they choose not to actively practice Catholicism as adults. P.9, while not providing a numerical rating, spoke about how RE emphasises fairness, respect, and tolerance. Additionally, P.8 emphasised the importance of RE fostering respect for diverse beliefs and promoting inclusivity.

As justification for a lower rating, P.3 and P.6 highlighted a disconnect between RE in schools and students' home lives, suggesting that while students may engage with RE content at school, there is often a lack of reinforcement at home, particularly in families that do not practice their faith actively. P.4 and P.6 raised questions about parental commitment to Catholic values beyond sacramental preparation, with P.4 suggesting that only a small percentage of families actively practice their faith. P.3 also observed a disconnect between RE lessons taught in schools and pupils' home lives, leading to challenges in reinforcing faith-based practices. Additionally, P.7, who rated RE at 6, also noted variability in parental commitment to religious practices outside of school, with some families prioritising RE mainly for sacramental milestones rather than ongoing religious engagement. The changing demographics and religious diversity within schools were considered an influence on the value attributed to RE. For instance, P.8 discussed how a significant portion of the school community comes from religious backgrounds other than Catholicism. P.7 also pointed out the competing pressures of curriculum demands in literacy and numeracy, especially in DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) settings, where educational priorities result in a sidelining of RE. P.6 mentioned that religion did not appear as a prominent subject in the children's

queries or expressions, and P.3 observed that students saw RE as more of a light or '*fun activity'* rather than a deeply spiritual or theological practice.

Other indicators of the importance afforded to RE by participants are reflected in the presence of an RE policy of including RE in the monthly progress report. The findings concerning both will be discussed in the theme of oversight later in this chapter.

### 4.3 Theme: Time

| 4.3 Theme: Time |
|---|
| 4.3.1 Sub-theme - Current Practice |
| 4.3.2 Sub-theme –Integration |
| 4.3.3 Sub theme –Sacramental Preparation |

Participants were asked how much time RE was afforded each day in their schools. All the participants indicated that the full two-and-a-half hours timetabled for RE were not fulfilled. While none of the participants acknowledged their own responsibility regarding the fulfilment of the time requirement for RE, they provided a number of reasons as to why the teachers in their schools might not give RE all the time they should. Participants also shared any potential impact a reduction in the time allocated to RE might have. The theme of time is divided into four subthemes: Time for RE - Current practice, Time for RE – Integration, Time for RE – Sacramental Preparation and Time for RE – Reduction in allocation.

#### 4.3.1 Current Practice

Current practice around time allocation for RE was explored with participants. Prior to the introduction of the *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023), the *Primary Curriculum* (DES, 1999) allocated two and a half hours per week for RE, which was timetabled as one-half hours per day. In order to explore any impact a reduction in time might have, participants were asked about the amount of time given to the teaching of RE. Participant responses revealed that no school fulfils the two-and-a-half-hour-per-week time allocation for RE; however, participants did not elaborate specifically on how much time is spent on RE. This was further teased out by discussing with participants the factors influencing teachers in either the fulfilment or non-fulfilment of the current time allocation. Table 4.2 illustrates the factors

perceived by participants that influence teachers to prioritise time for RE. Table 4.3 illustrates the factors presented by participants that reduce the time teachers afford RE.

Table 4.3. Factors that result in prioritisation of RE

| | Where the class is celebrating a sacrament | Visit of Diocesan Advisor |
|---|---|---|
| P.1 | ✓ | ✓ |
| P.2 | ✓ | |
| P.3 | ✓ | ✓ |
| P.4 | ✓ | |
| P.5 | ✓ | |
| P.6 | ✓ | |
| P.7 | ✓ | |
| P.8 | ✓ | |
| P.9 | ✓ | |
| P.10 | ✓ | ✓ |

Table 4.4. Factors that reduce the time afforded to RE

| | Teacher Faith Commitment | RE is not a Priority | Curriculum Overload/Time Pressure | Literacy and Numeracy a priority |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| P.1 | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| P.2 | | | ✓ | |
| P.3 | ✓ | | | |
| P.4 | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| P.5 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| P.6 | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| P.7 | | | | ✓ |
| P.8 | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| P.9 | | | ✓ | |
| P.10 | | | ✓ | |

In the first instance, curriculum overload and time pressure are cited by 70% of participants as a significant barrier to teachers achieving the total time allocation for RE. P.1 reflected that '*there is a lot of pressure on schools at the moment in terms of time.'* P.2 referred to the issue of curriculum overload where '*there are 11 subjects to teach, and they can't all be done comprehensively, and religious education has been squeezed to some extent as a result.'* P.4 described teachers that are '*overloaded and overwhelmed, and there's so much being thrown at them, they feel really under*

*pressure to cover everything in the day.*' P.6 concluded that *'there is a genuine issue regarding the competing time of the curriculum.'* Participants revealed that following the launch in 2011 of *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011 – 2020* (DES, 2011), teachers tend to prioritise literacy and numeracy over RE. At this time, there was an increase in initiatives in areas of literacy and numeracy, all competing for space in an already overcrowded curriculum, thus compounding demands on primary schools. P.5 pointed out, '*They prioritise the literacy and numeracy, which the curriculum, you know, places increased emphasis on anyway'* This prioritisation reflects the challenges teachers face in balancing multiple subjects within the constraints of a school day. Though crucial, initiatives in literacy and numeracy further overcrowd the curriculum, creating a challenging environment for RE. The competing demands of various subjects contribute to the struggle to meet the recommended time allocation for RE. 80% of participants indicated that teachers are happy to teach RE but only if other subjects, such as literacy and numeracy, which participants felt were perceived to be more important, have been covered. Participants' responses appeared to reflect a distancing of themselves from any sense of responsibility as the principal1 of the school regarding the promotion and adherence to the time requirement allocated to RE.

As outlined in Chapter 2, the *Grow in Love* programme is the only RE programme approved by the IEC for use in Catholic primary schools in Ireland. In this study 80% of participants viewed the programme positively. In fact, 40% regarded it as an improvement on the previous *Alive O* programme. Participants referred to the engaging interactive resources as well as the content of the *Grow in Love* programme, which participants considered more relevant to the to the lives of pupils, as the reason for its success. However, in considering the time afforded to RE, participants indicated that RE is more likely to be taught in junior classes rather than in senior classes. 40% of participants attributed the discrepancy to the perceived ease of teaching the RE programme to younger pupils. P.3 attributed this to a sense of fun associated with the *Grow in Love* programme in junior classes. According to P.3, '*they see it as a fun activity, it's light'.* This is echoed by P.5, who described RE in junior classes '*as something lovely to engage with, and it's, you know, the stories are done very well, and the online resources are lovely. So I would say it's done very well at the junior end.'* P.7 described RE as informal and fun because of the emphasis on storytelling and song singing. This is echoed by P.8, who identifies the storytelling and singing of songs as central to the programme's success at the junior level. Conversely, participants reported that they

saw a reluctance among teachers in senior classes to engage with RE. P.3 and P.5 both felt that teachers who teach at the senior level of the school shy away from RE because the subject matter is considered more complex. P.3 described RE as *'quite heavy from third class up.'* It is suggested by P.5 that teachers are intimidated by the subject matter in senior classes where 'you're *getting into the nitty gritty of topics and the theological understandings and underpinnings and all of that, and the dogma and theology and so on, so it does become more difficult.*' P.3 suggests that the programme is too in-depth in senior classes, where questions from students on matters of theology are too complex for teachers to answer. This results in teachers in senior classes avoiding aspects of the programme.

While exploring RE practices in the school, one participant suggested that prayer in the morning and afternoon is considered part of the time allocation for RE. When outlining the time afforded to RE, P.7 suggested, *'isn't it good if they do it at some point in the day, even if that is their prayer in the evening.'* This appeared to be almost a justification for the reduction of the time spent on RE. While morning and evening prayers are valuable practices within Catholic primary schools, they should complement, not replace, the structured, curriculum-driven time allocated for RE. Relying on prayer as a means to fulfil RE time requirements undermines the educational integrity and holistic intent of the *CPPRECI* (IEC, 2015) and fails to meet statutory obligations with regard to the time allocated for RE.

### 4.3.2 Integration of RE

Integration is the term used to describe the process whereby pupils are provided with learning experiences across different subject areas to create a cohesive and holistic educational experience (DES, 1999). The curriculum at primary level encourages a particular emphasis on the integration of subjects (DE, 2023). 50% of the participants in this study suggested that integration is potentially a way of ensuring that RE can be given more time than is currently the practice. History and geography are two subject areas proposed as suitable for such integration with RE by P.9, who suggested that 'there's *a historical aspect to it, there's a geographical aspect to it. It can be way more cross-curricular than it actually is.*' Integration is also proposed where '*using the medium of song and story,'* teachers can integrate RE with other curriculum subjects, according to P.7.

The *Primary Curriculum for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023) sets out that extra time is to be allocated to subjects which will focus on the wellbeing of students. The curriculum area of wellbeing will be covered in two subject areas, namely, Social, Personal, and Health Education (SPHE) and Physical Education (PE) (DE, 2023). Suggested time allocations for the curriculum area of wellbeing are seen as being afforded from two hours and thirty minutes at the junior level to three hours in senior classes (DE, 2023). RE is not included as a subject area that contributes to wellbeing. However, 30% of the participants in this study highlight the potential for RE with regard to wellbeing. These participants recognised how RE provides many key elements necessary for the wellbeing of students. P.5 and P.9 both suggested that RE gives students the message that God loves them and that there is a deeper meaning to the life that they are living. P.1 highlighted that '*there are good positive messages. I think a lot of what is taught is beneficial.*' RE in schools is recognised by P.5 and P.9 as providing opportunities for reflection and meditation. P.5 believes the overall message in RE should be considered very important in the lives of young pupils today. RE is recognised as providing support, comfort and hope to students. The message contained in RE in schools provides students with somewhere to turn to in times of need, according to P.5, P.3 and P.9. P.10 recognised the wellbeing benefits associated with RE where '*it gives them a sense of being, a sense of belonging, a sense of there being something greater than us.'* P.10 also believed that restorative practices and promoting resilience are facilitated through RE, where *'you learn that there's a reason that God has a blueprint for our lives*.' P.5 believed that there were solid links to be made between RE and wellbeing:

> *'Knowing that God is there if you need him, in either happy times or sad times, or any time. Knowing to light the candle, knowing you can go to the church, particularly, I suppose, in grief or loss, that faith is something that you can turn to, and that's a massive part of wellbeing.*' (P.5).

P.5 pointed out, however, that while there are definite links between wellbeing and RE, it is only one aspect of RE. P.5 cautioned against reducing the overall aim of the RE programme by calling it wellbeing as:

> *'Calling it wellbeing diminishes its capacity to be much more than that and takes away from the gift of religious education or the gift of providing an element of faith in a school. Wellbeing is a small piece of it. It's not all of it'* (P.5).

Several participants believed that there is potential for RE to integrate across the curriculum, in particular its ability to serve wellbeing. This thinking was endorsed by 50% of the study's participants, suggesting that integrating RE can enhance its presence and relevance.

### 4.3.3 Sacramental preparation

Participants were asked about the time afforded to the preparation of pupils for the sacraments. Sacramental preparation has traditionally taken place in Catholic primary schools as part of the RE programme. What is referred to here as sacramental preparation refers to the preparation of pupils for the ceremonies associated with the Sacrament of Reconciliation, commonly referred to as First Penance, First Eucharist, commonly known as First Holy Communion, and Confirmation. There are aspects of the RE programme that specifically deal with the preparation of pupils for the sacraments. However, 80% of participants focused on the time associated with practising for the celebration in the church.

Responses highlight the perspectives and practices associated with the readying of pupils to receive the sacraments, particularly preparation for the actual celebration of the sacrament. While there was consensus among participants that the total allocation of two and a half hours was not afforded RE in the school weekly timetable, 70% of participants believed a significant amount of additional time was allocated to prepare pupils for First Holy Communion and Confirmation ceremonies. This would appear to be contradictory. However, it becomes clear that what participants considered sacramental preparation was the rehearsals connected with participation in the ceremony associated with the sacrament. Participants report that the preparatory work intensifies in the days and weeks immediately prior to the church celebration. As reported by P.5, *'There's definitely a good burst of that now in those classes, particularly in the months around it.'* P.2 suggested that the increased time for those preparing for First Holy Communion is a feature of the entire year because of the additional ceremonies associated with First Communion. Such ceremonies are intended to be parish-based. However, P.2 felt that 'a *lot of work is done above and beyond throughout the year, not only in terms of the event itself but, let's say, with confession and the build-up to that.*' P.6 believed that *'a disproportionate amount of time was allocated, coming up to the various events to do with the ceremonies, whether it's the practices in the church or the pre-enrolment services.'* 40% of participants suggested that with the emphasis placed on the performance on the day, the deeper significance of the spiritual meaning underpinning the

receiving of the sacrament was lost. This indicates that this preparation, as described by participants, has very little connection with RE. When describing the preparations in their school P.1 describes how the '*event is prepared to the nth degree'* by the teacher. P.2 shared that teachers in their school understand that there is an expectation that they will go '*above and beyond'* in relation to the amount of work they will have to do in preparation of sacramental classes. P.6 spoke of celebrations that entail significant preparation due to the roles allocated to pupils. P.6 also reported: "*I really think it's more a production than a sacrament,'* describing a situation where the desire was to have the pupils perform well on the day because of how it reflected on the school. P.9 believed that the perception from teachers was that they '*want the school to look well. We'll do it almost as a production.'* This idea of the service as a school production, as reported by 70% of participants, starkly contrasts the practices reported by two participants who speak of more significant input at diocesan and parish levels. P.5 was grateful for the removal of the pressure associated with celebrating the sacraments because '*the sacrament is very much now, it's kind of parish based.'* As a result, the traditional roles performed by pupils, such as readings and prayers, were no longer part of the ceremony. Where traditionally the school would provide a choir, this was also provided by the parish. Additionally, P.5 spoke of the parish centre providing booklets for the sacramental celebrations. This participant also welcomed the resources provided at diocesan level. P.5 spoke about a faith community celebration which was organised by the diocese. This entailed bringing together pupils who had celebrated their Confirmation across the diocese. It is evident that P.5 appreciates the efforts made at both parish and diocesan level. This change is welcomed by P.5 as it alleviates the pressures associated with the ceremonies. P.10 spoke about a similar experience whereby the traditional roles for pupils, associated with the celebration of the sacraments, were discontinued following instruction from the diocese. Pupils were no longer allocated specific roles, such as readings on the day. P.10 spoke of their initial concern when this instruction was issued. They were concerned that it would dim the significance of the day for both parents and children. They also worried pupils and parents would be disappointed by not having jobs on the day. However, according to P.10, the result was '*that the children were focused on what was happening on the day rather than on the job that their teacher had given them.'* There was a sense from P.10 that everyone was happy about the removal of the pressure to perform. What resulted was a more meaningful experience that was welcomed by parents and teachers involved. So, while this new departure was initially considered a negative change, it is now viewed as a

positive. P.5 and P.10 both indicated that because of input from the diocese and greater involvement of the parish, the school and sacramental classes could focus on the deeper meaning associated with the sacrament. It also reduced significantly the amount of time and '*the amount of work that was required particularly around the practices and doing those jobs'* (P.10).

Another significant observation arising from the findings was the increased time necessary to adequately prepare pupils around appropriate behaviours while in the church participating in the sacramental ceremony. This preparation involved teaching them specific actions, such as understanding when to sit, stand, or kneel during the service. Additionally, children required guidance on maintaining decorum, such as refraining from talking and attentively listening to the priest. Three participants attributed the need to provide such instruction to broader societal changes, particularly the decline in religious observance and engagement with traditional religious practices. 20% of participants suggested that the preparation of students was more time-consuming in recent years since considerable time now must be spent teaching children prayer responses and behavioural norms in the church setting during Mass times. P.7 felt this directly resulted from children no longer attending Mass regularly with their families. Therefore, teaching Mass responses and respectful behaviour during Mass time has now become the class teacher's responsibility. As reported by P.4, '*They definitely haven't been brought to Mass frequently. So, we are training them from the get-go*.' While P.7 observed that:

> *'The children don't know the prayers. They don't know these kinds of things. They don't know how they're expected to behave in a church. So, I mean, you do have to teach that, and it takes a little bit of time'* (P.7).

The findings highlight an increased responsibility placed on schools to teach children prayers and behaviours that were traditionally learned through regular Mass attendance. While all participants acknowledged that the full-time requirement for RE was not being consistently met, 70% reported that additional time was dedicated specifically to sacramental classes. This apparent contradiction was clarified by participants, who indicated that the extra time was primarily focused on preparing students for the ceremonial aspects of the sacraments rather than fostering a deeper engagement with their spiritual significance.

In preparation for receiving the sacraments, parishes often organise a series of ceremonies designed to support pupils and their families in their sacramental journey. An example for First

Holy Communion is the Enrolment Ceremony. An example for Confirmation is the Service of Light.

### 4.4 Theme: Diversity

| 4.4 Theme: Diversity |
|---|
| 4.4.1 Sub theme: Diversity of student population |
| 4.4.2 Sub theme: Management of opt outs |
| 4.4.3 Sub theme: Teachers' faith commitment and RE |

Participants were asked how the school manages situations where pupils or parents request not to participate in RE. The findings revealed that all participants experienced situations that arose from increased diversity in their student population. Managing these situations involves navigating the complexities of accommodating pupils who opt out of RE while upholding the school's Catholic ethos. Two subthemes deal with diversity. The first subtheme examines the increase in diversity in student populations in the schools involved in this study. The second subtheme deals with how schools manage the increased number of pupils opting out of RE classes.

#### 4.4.1 Diversity of student population

Catholic schools today are dealing with increasingly diverse school communities. Primary schools are increasingly facing new challenges because of what is described as growing secularisation coupled with increased migration of people who are culturally and religiously diverse (Faas et al., 2016). Such challenges emerged as a finding in this study. The participants in this study all showed an awareness of the changed demographic among their respective student populations. P.6, a principal in an urban DEIS school (See 3.4.3 from Chapter 3) outlined that the high level of diversity directly impacted the importance and time afforded to RE throughout the whole school. According to P.6, because of the diverse student body, RE was not a priority. P.6 based this assertion on *'the number of children who would have participated in the sacraments and, indeed, in religion classes.'* P.7 also reported that their school had a multi-ethnic, multi-religious population. This school had twenty-three different faiths among the student population. Interestingly, P.7 observed that in their experience, non-Catholic families, particularly those of other faiths, prefer to enrol their child in a faith school *'because they just like the values and I suppose the ethos, that commitment'* (P.7). P.2 indicated that while the school endeavours to be

inclusive, this desire to be inclusive negatively impacts the treatment of RE whereby *'I think it's kind of a la carte really.'* The implication is that teachers did not follow the RE programme as intended. However, they taught aspects of the *Grow in Love* programme that would not cause any difficulty to parents and pupils who were not Catholic. The participant's observation indicates that the teacher concentrated on elements of the weekly theme outlined in the *Grow in Love* programme that were more general in nature, such as an art activity centred on the pupil's name or family, an activity included in the Junior Infant programme. In doing so, the teacher intentionally avoided engaging with activities that were overtly religious in content.

The perspectives presented by participants in this study reflected a nuanced discussion around RE in the Catholic school context, which is increasingly dealing with greater diversity. Catholic schools value diversity and aim to be inclusive. They welcome people from other denominations, different faiths, or no faith, treating everyone with respect and honouring their beliefs (CSP, 2019). While acknowledging the importance of being inclusive, P.5 and P.8 also referred to a Catholic school's right to teach and celebrate the Catholic faith. P.5 felt RE was '*under fire'* in a more secular society. P.8 argued that '*we have the right to celebrate our faith, we're not ashamed or trying to hide it or trying to walk away from us.'* P.2 offered a contrasting opinion. It was suggested that the emphasis on Catholicism is too dominant, and its prominence needs to make way for a more balanced approach which incorporates education about other religions.

> *'I think the religious education programme, as it currently stands, is stacked timewise and content-wise very much just in favour of Catholicism. I think the provision of additional material or time on other religions would be beneficial because I think it's good to compare and contrast your own religion with others. And also, it gives an opportunity for others to speak about their religion as well'* (P.2).

This assertion is inconsistent with the position articulated by the Catholic School Partnership (2019), where it is stated that 'the Catholic school welcomes diversity and strives for inclusivity" (CSP, 2019, p.8).

While there are growing numbers of pupils from different cultures in Catholic primary schools, participants also offered insight into the impact of growing secularism among Ireland's general population, reflecting the decline in numbers affiliated with traditional religious beliefs. This change has resulted in a decline in families participating in traditional religious practices such as attending weekly Mass, according to P.7 and P.3. This sentiment is echoed by P.3, who describes

a *'dip in, dip out religion'* where people are happy to turn up for christenings and other celebrations in the church but do not want to participate in weekly practice or the real religious significance behind celebrations in the church.

30% of participants indicated that school is probably the only place where most of their students encounter faith formation and religious observance. Described as a void between home and school, P.3 believed that religious observance was taught in school but not implemented at home. As a result, 'we're *teaching something that they're actually not getting a chance to implement in their everyday lives'* (P.3). P.7 also believed that *'It is us taking them up and down to the church. It is us preparing them by bringing them to Mass and having Masses ourselves'* (P.7). These schools reported that the school was the primary source of religious activity in the children's life.

The findings provided insight into the impact of the changed demographic in society. Overall, it was apparent that participants were aware of the increasingly diverse student population in primary schools today. It is clear from participants that there was a desire to be inclusive of all. How this increase in diversity among their students was managed was primarily up to each school. The following subsection will examine the findings concerning managing those who wish to opt out of RE classes.

### 4.4.2 Management of opt-outs

Participants were invited to talk about their experiences dealing with a child or parent of a child who requested that they not participate in RE classes. All the participants in the study had experienced dealing with this type of situation. Of the ten schools involved in the study, only two of the participants referenced formal written policies in their schools around how opt-outs were managed. No school reported any training or support concerning how they managed increasing diversity in the classroom or managing opt-outs in their school. It was evident that schools have developed practices resulting from an emerging situation in schools.

Table 4.5. How opt-outs are managed in schools

| | Dialogue with parents | School Policy on the management of opt outs | Alternative work provided | Allow pupil to be collected by parent | Change timetable to accommodate removal from RE class |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| P.1 | ✓ | | | | |
| P.2 | ✓ | | | | |
| P.3 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| P.4 | ✓ | | ✓ | | |
| P.5 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| P.6 | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| P.7 | ✓ | | ✓ | | |
| P.8 | ✓ | | | | |
| P.9 | | ✓ | | | |
| P.10 | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ |

As depicted in Table 4.5, the findings revealed a spectrum of approaches to managing those pupils who opt out from RE in Catholic primary schools. All the approaches were designed to accommodate, where possible, students and parents who do not wish to participate in formal RE as part of their education. P.5 spoke about the Patron mandating the school has an RE policy with a section stating how the school should manage pupils who opt out of RE. However, it was still up to the school what they say in their policy around how opt-outs were managed as P.5 described how '*schools are entitled to put in whatever they want,'* indicating that the Patron is not prescriptive around precisely what schools include in their policy. While this appears to suggest that the school had free reign, it was clear that the Patron expects the school to adhere to the position outlined by the CSP (2019, p.8), which advocates respect for the beliefs of others while maintaining its Catholic ethos. However, it indicates that schools were free to tailor their policies to meet the needs of their individual contexts.

70% of participants described engaging in dialogue with parents once the school was made aware of their desire to opt out of RE. Of those schools that endeavoured to accommodate alternative arrangements, 60% said that the school could not provide supervision outside of the classroom due to limited resources available. 40% facilitated the removal of the pupil from the class, either by going to another classroom or being collected from school by a parent or guardian. Eight

participants described a very informal approach to dealing with those who wished to opt out. These schools appeared to manage opt-outs on a case-by-case basis. P.1 believed this strategy allowed for flexibility:

> *'Because everyone is different, and everyone has different expectations and perhaps a policy might mean that you have to take an action in a certain way, and you don't have the wriggle room to kind of devise a different strategy'* (P.1).

P.2 described how the school established early in the admissions procedure those families who did not wish to participate in RE. This allowed for engagement, which considered '*their point of view and what they want by way of inclusion*' (P.2). It is apparent that all participants desired to do their best to accommodate and include pupils of other faiths and none within the available staffing and resources. As shared by P.2, P.3, P.6 and P.7, standard practices included facilitating conversations with parents and providing options. The options ranged from full participation in the class with inclusion and participation, with exclusion from specific elements such as sacramental celebration, to complete exclusion, where parents can collect pupils from school so they are not participating in RE. P.1 included the option of allowing the pupil to remain in the class but using headphones with music to provide an alternative to listening to the content of the RE lesson. P.3 described an option which involved the pupil staying in the classroom during RE.

> *'We give them differentiated work, so, therefore, they're still listening. They're just not participating, so they usually just have to stay in their place. They're given an extra worksheet'* (P.3).

P.7 described how 'they're *in the classroom, but they're given a separate folder of work to do at that time. That's how we deal with it*.' Eight of the ten schools that participated in the study have two class streams. However, only one participant suggested that the school accommodated pupils who wished to opt out of RE by configuring timetables to facilitate pupils working in another classroom at the same grade level. An increase in diversity among the student population was also described by P.8. This participant described a change in practices and procedures in the school around how such diversity was managed. No longer were non-Catholic students asked to leave the room during RE or assemblies associated with RE. P.8 described a development of trust within the school, which saw different religious leaders joining school assemblies. This meant pupils learned about other religions from different religious leaders in the parish. This change in procedure was

agreed upon in the school without any external input from either the Department of Education or the Patron. According to P.8, it worked well in the school.

P.7 and P.6 noted the challenges associated with sacramental preparation and going to the church for practice coming up to the celebration in the church. Non-Catholic pupils may have experienced marginalisation at these times as they were, according to P.7 and P.6, effectively ignored by the class teacher, and all attention was given to pupils preparing to celebrate the sacrament. Considering the extra time participants indicated allocated to this preparation, P.6 suggested that despite the large number of students of other faiths and none in the school, they appeared to be largely ignored throughout the time leading up to the celebration of the sacrament. P.6 reflected, '*God help the children who are non-Catholic because they may as well not be in school if I'm absolutely frank about it'*. Overall, participants described a variety of approaches to accommodating non-Catholic pupils. The findings reflect a desire for flexibility and sensitivity around managing opt-outs. Participants' efforts to accommodate parents and pupils cannot be taken for granted in the absence of any formal training or resourcing for diversity.

### 4.4.3 Teachers' faith commitment and RE

The tension between personal commitment to the Catholic faith and compliance of teaching staff regarding the teaching of RE emerged as a challenge to RE for participants in their schools. 50% of participants expressed an awareness of societal changes in religious practice. They recognised a decline in practising Catholics in society in general. This is evidenced in the Census data in recent years. In the 2016 Census, Roman Catholics accounted for 78% of the population. This figure dropped to 69% in the 2022 Census. Over 14% of the population reported having no religion (CSO, 2023). Participants recognised that this decline is understandably reflected in a school's teaching staff. According to P.1:

> '*I think the fact that you know, there's such a decline in people going to Mass and a decline in religious, in practising their religion, that is also, of course, going to be part of the teaching community* (P.1).

P.5 also linked declining religious practice in society and teachers in school, '*I suppose we have to take that into context in modern Ireland that not every teacher, who was teaching the Catholic faith in the classroom, is a practising Catholic'* (P.5).

Participants were asked whether teachers were willing to teach RE and if they were supportive of the preparation of pupils for religious services, sacramental preparation and Catholic Schools Week. According to 70% of the participants, teachers are willing to engage in school-related religious events throughout the school year as part of their work in the school. 70% of participants also said teachers did not openly say they were unwilling to teach RE. However, 60% of participants expressed concerns about the level of commitment and depth of meaningful understanding regarding the faith formation element of RE. This is clearly articulated in the answers provided by P.1 and P.3:

> *'So obviously, you will have a team of teachers who won't be religious. They might uphold the ethos, but ultimately, if they're not committed, it is having an impact. And if you like, it is the enemy within, because there is probably the opportunity to just tick a box with it, without any great meaningful understanding'* (P.1).

> *'It does depend on the teacher. Certain teachers just won't teach it. They literally do the bare minimum because they're not practising themselves, unfortunately, and they're in a Catholic school'* (P.3).

30% of participants also reported that some teachers had voiced dissatisfaction with their responsibility regarding RE. P.3 described meeting '*some resistance from teachers that are not practising Catholics themselves.'* P.4 suggested that it is necessary to be strategic around class allocation. The teacher's level of commitment is considered when assigning classes each year to ensure that sacramental classes are assigned a teacher who would *'be willing to prepare the children adequately and be truly committed to proper preparation'* (P.4).

While 70% of participants agreed that teachers do not openly indicate their dissatisfaction with having to teach RE, they did make it clear that this situation is associated with a sense of compliance on the part of the teacher. Phrases such as ‘a la carte’ and ‘dip in, dip out’ were used by P.2 and P.3 to describe how teachers approach the teaching of the RE programme. P.6 describes how teachers make '*political decisions'* which see them fulfil their duty regarding teaching RE to avoid conflict. With whom this conflict could be is unclear. P.3 describes how teachers' *tick the box on the advertisement'* to indicate they hold the certificate to teach RE to get a teaching position. While there is no box to tick on teaching applications, candidates are required to provide evidence that they hold the appropriate qualifications to teach RE in a Catholic primary school. P.3 makes the point that applicants are aware of the requirement and fulfil it to secure employment. 60% of

participants indicated that some teachers, who may not come from a position of faith, conform to the school's expectations. P.9 indicated an awareness of '*some disquiet or dissatisfaction'* around RE in the school, but no teacher had openly questioned the principal. P.6 was also concerned about the implication of teachers merely complying with the status quo in schools regarding teaching RE. They felt that '*until you decouple compliance from conviction, it doesn't matter what you do, and I think the whole thing is built on an edifice of compliance'* (P.6). According to P.6, all the teachers had the certificate to teach RE and '*assured us that they were Catholics'* who were happy to teach RE. However, P.6 went on to describe how they felt that RE was *'a subject as opposed to something they felt they should transfer and transmit,'* indicating their lack of commitment to the faith aspect of RE.

Teacher commitment is a growing concern for the school principals in this study. The sustainability of a situation whereby compliance serves as a substitute for commitment to RE is called into question. In addressing this point, P. 5 believes that the *Grow in Love programme* enables teachers to teach an RE programme without coming from a faith position. This opinion will be further explored in the next chapter.

### 4.5 Theme: Supports for RE

| 4.5 Theme: Supports for RE |
|---|
| 4.5.1 Sub theme: Support from the parish |
| 4.5.2 Sub theme: Support from the Patron |
| 4.5.3 Sub theme: Continuing Professional Development |

The school Patron is responsible for the content and oversight of the RE programme in Catholic primary schools. Participants were asked about any input or support they have experienced from their parish or diocese regarding RE.

#### 4.5.1 Support from the Parish

The findings reveal a wide spectrum of support from parish priests and parish members. The involvement of clergy varied from school to school. For example, P.7 shared how certain practices like prayer services and enhancements to the school's sacred space were developed collaboratively between the local priest and teachers. Similarly, P.10 mentions initiatives like introducing the rosary based on the parish priest's suggestions, which the school adopted as part of their RE

activities. P.9 describes a new parish priest who actively interacts with students and organises community-based activities. This contrasts with earlier experiences where priests primarily addressed teachers. Overall, 9 out of the 10 participants spoke about the local priest visiting the school regularly. For example, P.2 reported that '*the parish priest would call to classes'*. P.5 described how *'local clergy visit the school as well so they are a presence in the school. I think the school community is left in no doubt but that the clergy are involved in the school.'*

While the informal involvement described above strengthens the bond between parish and school, the preparation for sacraments is a central aspect of the parish's support for RE P.1 highlights how local clergy visits provide a visible assurance of their involvement in schools. Similarly, P.5 emphasises the importance of informal relationships between the parish priest and school communities, noting that their frequent visits, interactions with all classes, and participation in events like graduation Masses foster a strong bond with the parish. P.10 pointed out that '*we have a meeting every year at the start of the year with the clergy in the parish'.*

P.5 spoke about the influence of the diocese regarding the input of the parish priest where the support at diocesan level filters down to parish level '*so the parishes and the parish priests are very aware of the work the diocese does, and all of the parish priests are asked to be frequent visitors to the school, and they are.'* P.5 also described visits from the local parish priest as frequent. This input involved all classes and not just those in classes engaged in sacramental preparation. What is reported as an informal relationship between the priest and the school is highly valued. Practical support is also provided through the parish centre, which produces the booklet for the sacramental celebrations. Such practices were greatly appreciated by P.5. It is interesting to note that one participant believed that it was incumbent upon the local parish priest to visit the school as they believed that RE was the responsibility of the local clergy.

> *'We would have visits from Fr [mentions the name of a priest] and to be honest, I would encourage that because, look, I feel it's his responsibility to be honest'* (P.7).

Successful collaboration often depends on the individual priest's capabilities, priorities, and health. P.6 notes that sacramental preparation often falls to schools when priests are less involved. This reflects the evolving role of schools in taking responsibility for upholding religious traditions. In one case where the local priest was less involved, other parish figures, such as parish clerks and a nun from the parish, stepped in to bridge the gap. P.4 describes how a parish clerk with a

background in RE plays a pivotal role in sacramental preparation. This collaboration helps maintain the parish's influence on RE despite potential limitations in clergy availability.

However, some challenges are noted by P.3, where a physically limited parish priest could no longer support the programme. This resulted in reduced engagement between the parish, parents, and pupils in sacramental preparation. P.3 described a situation where the school had little or no input from the local parish priest. This was primarily due to his age and poor health. '*We have a parish priest who is physically unable in fairness to come into school. And he does very little'* (P.3). Previous experiences with a local priest, who was very involved with the school, provided this participant with an awareness of how positive parish engagement enriched RE practice.

### 4.5.2 Support from the Patron

Participants were asked an open-ended question about the diocese's role in RE. Participants were not specifically asked about their engagement with Diocesan Advisors (DA), who are the responsibility of each diocese. The DA is appointed by the bishop of the diocese '*to act in the name of the Catholic Church concerning the support of Catholic faith schools within the diocese'* (Sexton & McCormack, 2021). DAs have no formal role in inspecting the quality of teaching and learning in RE. The role of the DA at post-primary level is outlined in a handbook published by the Irish Catholic Bishop's Conference in 2013, entitled *The Role of the Diocesan Advisor for Post-Primary Religious Education*. No such document exists for primary level at this time. No participant spoke specifically about feeling supported by the DA; indeed, according to participants, their impending visit appeared to cause some teachers to engage in increased time for RE to make up for time not previously given to the subject. Reference was made to the Diocesan Advisor visit by P.1, who described how '*I think there's a flurry of activity when it comes to when the Catholic diocesan advisors come to your school.'* A similar situation was described by P.10 concerning teachers' reaction, '*because the religious inspector is calling next week, you get a blast of it.'* The inspector referred to here is the DA. This shows a mismatch between the intended supportive role of the DA and how some teachers and school principals perceive it. There is no form of inspection of RE at primary level; however, it is evident from the language used by P.10 that some participants experience the DA as an inspector. While diocesan advisors aim to provide guidance and support, the perception of their visits as inspections can arise from ambiguity in their role and structural

similarities to inspections. If principals and staff are unclear about the non-inspectional nature of the visit, they might interpret it as an evaluative exercise.

While the ten principals who participated in this study work in schools spread across seven dioceses, one participant's contribution is striking in how they spoke about Patron support. According to P.5, a clear structure exists in this diocese supporting primary schools.

> *'So, we're very lucky in the diocese of [mentions name of diocese]. The bishop has invested a huge amount of time and resources into supporting schools both in terms of managing Catholic schools, because he's the Patron and in terms of Religious Education. So, there's the bishop but the bishop has a diocesan Education Council'* (P.5).

This diocese has a well-structured website that provides easy navigation and clear support and direction to schools and teachers around sacramental preparation. This participant was the only one aware of a Patron policy regarding sacramental preparation. None of the other participants spoke of a similar level of support. When asked about direct contact from the Patron, the other participants spoke of receiving a letter or email before the Confirmation ceremony outlining specific instructions regarding the service. P.2 spoke about a list received from the patron '*about expectations on the day for confirmation.'* P.3 had a similar experience:

> '*The letter I get from the bishop a few weeks before the Confirmation telling me what has to be done, what hasn't to be done? And what exactly is acceptable and unacceptable on the day'* (P.3).

P.10 described a letter that the Patron sent to the local parish priest, '*and our parish priest acted upon it and brought us all together to explain the changes that were being requested.'* Only one participant, P.9, spoke about the Patron visiting the school. This event had taken place for the first time the previous year. It appears to have been generally well received and was a practice that provided a very positive experience for the pupils preparing for the sacrament of Confirmation in 6th class.

### 4.5.3 Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

Participants in this study were asked about the provision of CPD for RE and other aspects of the school's Catholic ethos. It is expected that CPD, related to school ethos or RE, is provided by the Patron. It is clear from participants that most school personnel were not provided with any CPD. One outlier, P.5, reported that the diocese provided a high level of general support. This diocese

*'also provides ongoing Inservice in terms of Grow in Love that will probably run again this year, just for new teachers in the system or maybe new teachers to Catholic schools'* (P.5). The other participants did not experience this same level of CPD. Apart from P.5, participants reported that they could not remember getting any other CPD provided by their Patron that related to RE or ethos. When specifically asked about CPD, the following were some of the responses:

> '*I think there was an initial flurry of education around the Grow in Love series when it came out first, but after that, very little'* (P.1).
>
> *'The only CPD that I remember is when the Grow in Love programme came out, the diocese organised an event on it, I think it was for infants to second'* (P.2).
>
> *'So, I suppose the Grow in Love programme came out, and I think there was one in-service day'* (P.3).
>
> 'There's *no CPD though, there's none'* (P.9).

Since the introduction of the *Grow in Love programme* to junior classes, no CPD has been provided for most schools that participated in this study. The school Patron provided this training. P.3 highlighted the difference between the level of support given with the introduction of the *Primary Language Curriculum* (DES, 2019) and the training received from the Patron for the new RE programme: '*We have a new language programme. We're getting loads of half-day closures and loads of training as you would with any new curricular area.'* There was a real sense among 90% of participants that they did not receive sufficient training in the RE programme. According to Circular 37/1997, under Rule 58 of the *Rules for National Schools*, when teachers participate in Department of Education-approved professional development, they gain what are referred to as Extra Personal Vacation days, more commonly referred to as EPV days. Apart from P.5, no participant reported ever getting EPV days for undertaking courses related to RE. According to this participant, the diocese developed courses and successfully obtained Department of Education approval to award EPV days upon completion. P.8 and P.9 both mentioned that providing EPV days for Department of Education-approved courses around RE and ethos would improve attitudes towards such training.

Participants were invited to identify areas for future CPD in RE that would support principals and teachers. Their responses yielded a comprehensive range of suggestions for CPD that schools would find valuable. All participants acknowledged the necessity for CPD in matters related to

RE. 50% wanted ongoing training on implementing the *Grow in Love* programme. For example, P.1 requested '*upskilling on the programme. We have new teachers coming into our system all the time, and yet they haven't had CPD in it, you know.* 'This is an interesting perspective as it shows no awareness of the input newly qualified teachers would have received through degree and cert programmes. Newly qualified teachers may be better prepared to teach RE than teachers who have been in the role for many years. This was recognised by P.3, who described how a student teacher was able to provide what is described as CPD to other staff members on the new RE programme. 40% suggested they would like to see CPD on matters related to developing the school's ethos, and 20% wanted to see CPD on managing inclusion of non-Catholic pupils. For example, P.2 felt that schools needed support around '*dealing with wider issues like the inclusion or the extent of inclusion with children of other faiths or none.*' P.9 felt that there was a need for opportunities for school personnel to engage in CPD based on school culture, ethos and values. 100% of participants saw value in CPD. However, all but P.5 expressed dissatisfaction at the level of CPD provided, considering it severely lacking or entirely non-existent.

### 4.6 Theme: Oversight

| 4.6 Theme: Oversight of RE |
|---|
| 4.6.1 Sub theme: In school oversight |
| 4.6.2 Sub theme: Board of management oversight |
| 4.6.3 Sub theme: Patron oversight |

Oversight for the planning, teaching and learning and assessment of RE is not included within the inspection remit of the Department of Education Inspectorate. When the Department of Education Inspectorate engages in a whole school evaluation or curriculum inspection, teachers are not required to provide any RE planning, teaching and assessment records. The planning and oversight of RE is a matter for the Patron of the school. The Patron delegates the responsibility to the school board of management, and the principal is answerable to the board concerning the day-to-day management of the school.

#### 4.6.1 In-school oversight

The principals participating in this research were questioned about their awareness of the RE curriculum taught by teachers in their schools. Additionally, they were asked whether RE or ethos

was a regular topic of discussion at staff meetings or board of management meetings. As demonstrated in Table 4.6., internal oversight in schools is limited.

Table 4.6. Internal oversight of RE in schools

| | **Cuntas Miosuil** | **Agenda item at staff meeting** | **Whole school RE policy** | **Regular agenda item for Board of Management** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| P.1 | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| P.2 | | | | |
| P.3 | | ✓ | | |
| P.4 | | ✓ | | |
| P.5 | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| P.6 | | | ✓ | |
| P.7 | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| P.8 | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| P.9 | ✓ | | | |
| P.10 | | ✓ | | |

Participants were also asked if there was a school policy for RE and if RE was an item in the teacher's monthly progress report known in schools as the Cuntas Miosuil. This report serves as a record of the work covered by each teacher in each class. It is retained in the school and made available to Department of Education inspectors on request. It was apparent that there was no consistency in the oversight of RE provided at school level. 60% of the principals said that RE was included as a section in their monthly reports. However, one principal described the inclusion of RE in the monthly report as a tick-box exercise, and another stated that the level of detail did not match what was expected for other subject areas. Only P.3 spoke about monitoring the information in the reports regarding RE and engaging with staff regarding the content of this section.

The Governance Manual for Primary Schools 2023–2027 (DE, 2023) assigns principals responsibility for the school's day-to-day management, including guiding and directing teachers. Additionally, *Share the Good News* (IE, 2010, p.146) highlights the principal's role in ensuring *'a consistent and coordinated approach'* to the delivery of RE. However, 70% of the principals in this study showed no sense of responsibility for what teachers taught or how successful pupil outcomes were concerning RE. Only two participants spoke about their responsibility and role as leaders. P.1, an administrative principal, felt a sense of responsibility for ensuring that the board

was informed about religious events in the school. Three participants mentioned modelling praying with the children for other staff members. P.2, an administrative principal, described their role whereby '*I suppose I feel like I'm modelling the kind of Catholic ethos, and where appropriate, religious education in the school.*' Neither of the two teaching principals spoke about modelling RE in their schools. 20% of participants spoke about delegating the RE coordinator role to another staff member. Two administrative principals involved in the study spoke about not feeling familiar enough with the RE programme being taught. P.4 described feeling 'a *little bit removed from it because I have been out of class for probably eight years now myself.'* P.1 spoke about a sense of responsibility in monitoring RE; however, they later admitted that such monitoring was largely informal, arguing that *'it's a large school, so you can't visit everyone all the time.'* 50% of the schools did have a RE policy. P 6 described the policy as a historic document that had not been reviewed for some time. P.7 also described their policy document as '*ancient*' and '*in need of updating.*'

In contrast, P5 describes a '*proactive diocese'* that provides template policy documents for schools. According to P.5, the diocese has a Diocesan Education Council that meets every second month to discuss ongoing issues regarding RE and ethos to consider how the diocese might support schools. The RE policy document, mandated by the diocese, is returned to the diocese once the school has completed it for Patron approval. No other participant spoke of this level of engagement from their diocese. Most schools reported no training or support around formulating the school RE policy.

When asked about RE at staff meetings, participants referred primarily to planning for the ceremonies associated with sacramental preparation or other planned religious celebrations such as Catholic Schools Week or a school Mass. According to all participants, RE was rarely mentioned to substitute teachers who came to work in the schools involved in this study. None of the participants referred to any form of assessment of RE or any method of measuring the programme's success. In recent years, as part of the School Self-Evaluation process, schools have developed a pattern of engagement with parents and pupils to gather information about different areas of the curriculum and school policies and procedures. No school mentioned engaging pupils or parents to give feedback on the RE programme or its content.

### 4.6.2 Board of Management Oversight

Regarding oversight by the board of management, as secretary to the board, the principal is responsible for setting the agenda for each board meeting with the chairperson. The Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA), the management body for Catholic primary schools, advises that ethos and RE are constant items on the agenda for board meetings (CPSMA, 2019). This ensures that boards comply with their duty to uphold the school's ethos. Participants were asked about the inclusion of RE at board meetings. 90% of participants reported that any reference to RE or ethos appeared primarily to be included in the principal's report and involved reference to sacramental preparation, religious celebrations, Catholic Schools Week or the visit of the Diocesan Advisor. P.1 spoke about *'it'll be part of the principal's report for school events and celebrations.'* P.6 observed that:

> *'the item of religion would never have been on the board of management. However, in the principal's report, there would always have been reference to, let's say, religious events for instance.'*

Only P.9 described a situation where the chairperson, who was also the local parish priest, requested a regular space on the agenda at the board of management meeting to discuss items regarding RE and the school's ethos. P.5 also described sharing items regarding religious events, such as the celebration of the sacraments; however, they also spoke about getting the school's religious coordinator to make a report to the board of management around their activities to promote the ethos of the school and their management of sacramental preparation and other religious events in the school calendar.

### 4.6.3 Patron oversight

Patrons are ultimately responsible for the implementation of RE in their schools. Participants were asked for input or engagement from the Patron. P.9 spoke about the bishop of the diocese visiting the school outside of the Confirmation service; however, this visit appears to have been more of a social occasion rather than any form of oversight. P.5 also spoke of very positive engagement with the school Patron. They also spoke about the support provided by the Patron, and there was a definite sense that they felt accountable to the Patron regarding RE. The fact that the Patron expected the school to share their RE policy for approval shows a level of oversight not apparent in any other schools in this study. In contrast, P.6 spoke about teachers complying with their duty

to avoid drawing negative attention from the Patron, where, according to P.6, '*they do not want to draw the Patron on them.'*

For most participants, there is a sense that oversight on behalf of the Patron seems to predominantly come under the remit of the Diocesan Advisors (henceforth DA). P.1 described '*the visits of Diocesan Advisors to the school, you know, just to look at our religious programme and to take any comments we have around it.*' 30% of participants reported that the imminent arrival of the DA caused a flurry of activity with teachers striving to cover RE content. These participants gave the impression that the DA was some form of inspector; P. 3 referred to the DA as the 'Cigire', which is the Irish word for inspector. It is, however, clear from participants that the visit of the DA did not have the same impact as a visit from the Department of Education inspector concerning teachers being accountable for teaching, learning and assessment in RE.

Overall, it is quite clear that there is no structure to the oversight of RE in Catholic primary schools. Participants seem to suggest that teachers are largely left alone regarding their engagement with RE in their classrooms. Unlike other curricular areas, there is no pressure on teachers to maintain evidence of planning and assessment around what pupils are learning.

### 4.7 The Impact of Curriculum Developments

| Theme: **THE IMPACT OF CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENTS** | |
|---|---|
| Sub-theme | Reduction in time |
| Sub-theme | A change in terminology |

The findings regarding the reduction in time for RE in the *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023) and the change in terminology from RE to Religion/Ethical/Multi-belief and Values Education—The Patron's Programme reveal different opinions, reflecting concerns over RE's diminishing emphasis and its broader implications for faith-based education in Catholic schools.

#### 4.7.1 Reduction in Time for RE

Participants were asked for their opinions regarding the potential impact of the reduction in time in the *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023). This reduces

time from two and a half hours to two hours per week for RE. Although most participants indicated that this adjustment is unlikely to impact the actual time spent on RE, concerns emerged about the perceived devaluation of the subject. In total, 60% of participant responses indicated that they do not believe this reduction will impact the time spent on RE in schools in any significant way. There was 100% agreement that RE was not given its full-time allocation of two and a half hours up to this point. This sentiment is captured in statements from participants such as P.1, who suggested that a reduction in time was *'manifesting itself in schools anyway'* and where P.2 suggested that *'I don't think there'll be any substantial reduction in its implementation in reality'.* P.5 questioned whether two and a half hours was ever being done for most classes up to this point. While P.6 said, '*If the reduced timetable was fulfilled, it would actually be an increase in dedicated time for religion.'* None of the participants felt that any teacher was fulfilling two and a half hours. Therefore, should teachers adhere to the new allocation of two hours, they could be affording RE more time than before. Concerns were expressed by 30% of participants that this recent reduction would lessen even further the actual time spent on RE. P.7 was worried that the reduction in time for RE sent the message that it was acceptable to reduce the time spent on RE even further. P.7 stated:

> '*What you don't want is if there were two and a half hours for it, and they were only giving two. Now that there's two, they'll only give an hour and a half*' (P.7).

This is a fear also articulated in the response given by P.5, who asked:

> '*Now that it's going to be reduced, I'd say the effort to get the reduced target that will reduce again. So, what are we going to* end *up with, a half an hour a week, an hour a week?'* (P.5).

40% of the participants expressed concern that this change might encourage the perception that RE is less important, potentially leading to irregular or inconsistent teaching practices. P7 and P8 echoed this concern. P.1 expressed concern, stating, '*I think it will lessen the importance of religion in the school. I think it gives a signal that it is not as important as it once was.'* This concern was founded on the belief that *'the signal is there now that it isn't important. So, I think it will have an impact'* (P.1). This fear was echoed by P.8, who shared that:

> '*In terms of perception, so somebody reduces the amount of time because it's less important. So, the things that are important get more time. Therefore, the inference is that if the state has decided to reduce the time spent on religion, religion is not important.'* (P.8).

It can be concluded that while participants agreed that the actual time given to RE will not change significantly in practice, the perception will be that the subject is devalued in some way by being singled out for a reduction in time. 40% of the participants in this study believed the selection RE for a reduction in time allocation reflects a devaluing of the subject at primary level going forward.

### 4.7.2 A Change in Terminology

The change from RE to Religion/Ethical/Multi-belief and Values Education – The Patron's Programme elicited different participant reactions. Many saw it as a reflection of broader societal and educational shifts. Overall, 50% of the principals considered the change as positive indicating that it emphasised the role of the Patron and reflects the growing reality of a multi-cultural society. 40% of participants saw the terminology change as a reflection of reality. P1 noted that the new term reinforced the Patron's authority over what is taught in religious education. P5 and P6 viewed the term as more inclusive of schools with Patrons from other faiths and none. P2 suggested that the name change was unlikely to impact the place of RE in schools.

In contrast, two participants expressed concern that changing the name could lead to a devaluation of RE. P3 argued that it signalled a gradual shift from RE in a primary curriculum. Similarly, P4 interpreted the shift as part of a longer-term plan to reduce the prominence of RE within the school system. P5 speculated that RE might eventually be removed from the curriculum altogether. In contrast, some participants, P7 and P10, felt the change in terminology was of little consequence. P10 saw it as merely a change in terms without significantly impacting how RE would be implemented in practice.

## 4.7 Conclusion

This chapter presents the findings of this research, which considers the views of Catholic school principals around RE as a key expression of ethos. Following analysis of the transcripts, six overarching themes were identified: Understanding Ethos, Time for RE, Diversity, Support for RE and Oversight of RE and the impact of Curriculum developments. These themes will be discussed in the discussion chapter which follows, where the findings and existing literature in the area will be drawn together in order to develop a better understanding of whether or not RE is recognised as contributing to the articulation of ethos in the Catholic primary schools involved in this study.

# Chapter 5: Discussion

## 5.1 Introduction

The framework developed by Catholic Schools Partnership (CSP) *Understanding and Living the Ethos in a Catholic School: A Process Centred on Conversations* (2019) situates RE as one of the five characteristics which underpin ethos in a Catholic primary school. This research examines principals' perceptions of the practice of RE in their schools and the potential impact of recent developments on its role within the Catholic primary school's ethos. The research explores three main areas of inquiry: principals' views on the importance of RE within their schools, their experiences with current RE practices and the factors they identify as influencing these practices, and their interpretations of recent curriculum developments and their potential implications for practices in RE. This chapter draws together the findings outlined in Chapter 4 and existing literature to understand better the factors that influence RE in practice in the Catholic primary schools involved in this study. The following section will initially consider the importance attributed to RE by participants in this study.

## 5.2 Principals' perspectives on the importance of RE

A key focus for this research is how important principals consider RE to be in their schools. Gathering principals' perspectives on ethos provides the necessary context for evaluating how RE is situated and valued within the broader educational landscape of the school. Additionally, it offers an indication as to whether participants considered RE as an element of their school's ethos. The Education Act (1998) describes the components that define a school's ethos as the 'cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which inform and are characteristic of the objectives and conduct of the school' (Government of Ireland 1998, 15(2)(b). As stated in Chapter 2, ethos in a Catholic primary school is conceptualised as the lived manifestation of the Catholic faith, which influences the educational and spiritual life of the school. This ethos extends beyond the RE curriculum, permeating the values, traditions, and communal practices that underpin the holistic development of students and the overarching purpose of the school.

Participants used terms such as culture, prayer, interactions, and atmosphere in their responses. This aligns with the literature explored in Chapter 2, where concepts such as atmosphere (Norman,

2003) and patterns of belief and community practice (Jones & Barrie, 2015) are central to the descriptions of ethos. CSP (2019) defines RE as a key expression of ethos. However, the reality in the schools involved in this study indicates a divergence from this ideal, mainly when RE does not receive its full-time allocation. The disparity between the CSP's vision and the actual practice in schools raises critical questions about the role of RE in maintaining and expressing a Catholic ethos. When asked about ethos in their schools, only 30% of participants referenced RE as integral to its ethos. While ethos should guide the centrality of RE, the findings indicate that external pressures, such as literacy/numeracy demands and demographic shifts, dilute its position. Participants showed no awareness of the framework developed by CSP, which was intended as a support document for Catholic primary schools in understanding and living their ethos. The CSP identifies RE as a fundamental characteristic of a Catholic primary school ethos, which suggests that RE should be a core component that expresses the school's ethos. The lack of awareness among participants about the CSP framework highlights a disconnect between its intent and its actual influence in schools. This suggests a breakdown in communication/implementation policy between patrons and schools despite the resources invested in its design and dissemination.

As outlined in the *Governance Manual for Primary Schools 2023–2027* (DE, 2023), the principal is tasked with the day-to-day management of the school, which includes providing guidance and direction to teachers. Specifically concerning RE, *Share the Good News* (IEC, 2010) assigns the principal the responsibility of ensuring a 'consistent and coordinated approach' to RE (IEC, 2010, p.146). As indicated in the literature, the school principal has a significant influence on the management of the school (Coll, 2009; Boyle, 2016; Branson et al., 2019). Additionally, the Patron has the legitimate expectation that the principal will fulfil this role. Principals are, therefore, central to allocating resources and promoting RE. 50% of participants in this study rated RE as very important to pupils' lives. This would imply that they are very proactive in their leadership and management of RE in their schools. However, the importance attributed by participants to RE does not, in fact, translate into actions that promote RE. As the person designated with the responsibility for overseeing a consistent and coordinated approach, monitoring curriculum implementation, and updating the board on teaching and learning in RE, the principal has a key role in ensuring RE remains vibrant and relevant to the life of the school. However, this research indicates significant disparities in how principals view and execute their leadership responsibilities for RE: Only 20% of participants actively monitored RE, with the remainder viewing this responsibility as informal

or delegating it to other staff. Three principals, who were administrative principals and therefore do not perform teaching duties, expressed feeling removed from classroom teaching of RE, citing their long absence from classroom roles. RE policies were outdated or treated as historical documents in half the schools, with limited engagement in their formulation or review. The findings expose a lack of robust accountability mechanisms for RE, consistent with Meehan et al. (2024), who identified the absence of oversight as a core reason for inconsistent RE delivery. This neglect contrasts sharply with the structured accountability for other curriculum areas, such as literacy and numeracy.

### 5.3 Principals' experiences of current practices around RE in their schools.

The *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland* (*CPPRECI*), published by the Irish Episcopal Conference in 2015, is the first formal curriculum for Catholic primary schools in Ireland. According to the *CPPRECI* (IEC, 2015), RE 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). Participants were encouraged to share their views on RE practices in their schools and their perceptions of the factors that influence those practices. The next section will explore principals' perceptions and experiences regarding RE practices in their schools, focusing on the factors that influence how RE is delivered and positioned within the broader curriculum.

#### 5.3.1 RE and time allocation

The evidence gathered from participants about the actual time dedicated to RE in schools highlights the challenges associated with balancing educational priorities (See 2.10.1 from Chapter 2). At the time of this study, the time allocation for RE was two and a half hours per week. None of the schools in the study consistently allocated the full half-hour per day for RE. Participants shared various reasons for this, with 70% attributing the reduction in time to curriculum overload or the pressure to fit everything into the limited school day. According to 30% of participants, priority is given to literacy and numeracy, resulting in teachers focusing more on these subject areas. Schools must now report literacy and numeracy standardised test scores annually to the Department of Education. This policy encourages a focus on subjects that directly impact these metrics. However, it can also negatively impact the holistic development prioritised in the

Education Act (1998) and Catholic education philosophy. In articulating this philosophy, Catholic primary schools are places where the 'dignity, self-esteem and full development of each person, made in God's image and uniquely loved by God' is to the fore (IEC, 2010, p.142). Their educational purpose transcends the provision of skills tailored to meet economic needs. Catholic education engages with 'fundamental questions about the meaning of life,' guided by the Gospel of Jesus Christ (ICBC, 2008, p. 2) and articulates an understanding of the human person which is deeply rooted in the teachings of Jesus Christ (ICBC, 2007). An emphasis on cognitive learning neglects the spiritual dimension of the pupils' lives (Buchanan & Hyde, 2008). It is a move away from an education that supports the child's holistic development. The narrowing of the curriculum by neglecting a broad subject base undermines the comprehensive educational experience intended for pupils in primary school. Narrowing the curriculum means a disproportionate focus on perceived core subjects, often in response to policy or assessment pressures. It results in other critical areas, such as the arts, physical education, and RE, being neglected. Data gathered in this study shows the reality in schools where teachers focus on measurable literacy and numeracy outcomes. Factors that contributed to the nonfulfillment of the time for RE were curriculum overload and time pressures, as cited by 80%, and a prioritising of literacy and numeracy, as cited by 30% of participants. This data concurs with the perspective that there is a 'narrowing of the curriculum' (Gleeson et al*.,* 2020, p.479). It also concurs with Usher (2016), who asserts that a focus on measurable outcomes results in a hierarchy with subjects such as literacy and numeracy afforded more time. This further adds to the challenge of finding time in the school day for subjects such as RE, which contribute to a holistic education.

The reduction in RE's time allocation, as noted in The *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023), might imply a diminishment in the value of RE. Moreover, the inconsistent positioning of RE within the *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023) creates ambiguity regarding its role. While RE is listed as a subject, it is positioned outside the core integrated curriculum. This marginalisation, grouping RE with non-academic activities such as recreation and assembly, risks diminishing its significance within the overall educational framework and reduces the potential for integration as envisaged by the *CPPRECI* (IEC, 2015). The positioning of RE outside the core curriculum may lead to a perception that it is optional or less integral to the educational experience. While other

subjects have also experienced time reductions, they remain embedded within the integrated curriculum, whereas RE does not.

### 5.3.2 Integration and RE

As outlined above, according to all participants in this study, no one adhered to the time specification of two and a half hours per week. Integration of RE with core curriculum subjects was proposed by 50% of participants as a potential way of ensuring that RE receives more time than is currently the practice. Burke and Lehane (2023) argue that combining RE with other subjects may alleviate time pressures. Despite the reduction in RE's time allocation in the *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023), integration could provide an opportunity to enhance RE's presence within the curriculum. Participants indicated that the integration of RE might compensate for the time reduction. However, this is contrary to the expectations of Patrons and curriculum time specifications set out by the Department of Education (2023).

The integration of RE within the curriculum presents both opportunities and complexities. The concept of curriculum integration, which seeks to create cohesive and holistic educational experiences by connecting subject areas, is promoted in the *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023). However, distinct challenges emerge when applied to RE, involving educational and faith formation elements in Catholic schools. As 50% of participants suggested, integrating RE with other subjects such as history, geography, and the arts can enrich students' understanding by contextualising religious topics within broader social, historical, and cultural frameworks. The *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023) emphasises the importance of integrated learning experiences to enhance the relevance of the curriculum to children's lives. Participants in the study, such as P.9 and P.7, suggest that cross-curricular approaches allow students to engage with religious education in a way that highlights its connections to history, music and art. This integration aligns with the aims of holistic education and potentially fosters deeper connections between RE and other subjects. However, significant concerns arise regarding the potential dilution of RE's distinct religious, spiritual, and moral focus. The *CPPRECI* (IEC, 2015) cautions that RE in Catholic schools uniquely nurtures faith and religious identity. Integrating RE with other subjects risks diminishing its faith formation aspects, reducing it to a mere academic subject. An examination of the

opportunities for integration as presented in the *CPPRECI* (IEC, 2015) clearly shows that it is envisaged that skills and concepts can be developed through RE within the time allocation for RE. For example, RE 'incorporates the use of listening and speaking as central learning strategies, providing opportunities for the enrichment and extension of children's oral language', thus developing language and literacy skills (IEC, 2015, p. 163). What 50% of participants appear to be suggesting is not the same. They suggest that aspects of the RE curriculum could be included in other subjects such as Art, Music, History or Geography. However, this would diminish the integrity of the subject of RE and result in the time for RE being eroded. Embedding RE in broader curricular contexts could give students a richer understanding of religious themes and their interconnections with other areas of study. However, the potential risks, particularly concerning the integrity of RE's faith formation goals, cannot be overlooked.

Participants referenced the increasing diversity of classrooms, which adds another layer of complexity to integration with RE. As classrooms become more religiously and culturally diverse, integrating RE presents practical challenges in ensuring inclusivity and respecting the rights of students from different faith backgrounds or none. Students who opt out of RE may inadvertently be exposed to religious content through integrated cross-curricular activities. Managing this requires careful planning to ensure that integration respects religious diversity while preserving RE's distinct religious and spiritual aims for Catholic students. The *CPPRECI* (2015) emphasises the importance of preserving RE's distinctiveness, warning that integration could compromise its core faith-forming objectives.

### 5.3.3 RE and Wellbeing

In recent years, wellbeing has emerged as a significant focus in schools and the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* was published by the Department of Education in 2018. It aims to ensure that schools 'play a vital role in promoting wellbeing through various activities and approaches to support the academic, physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual development of all children and young people' (DES, 2018, p.5). Being well is one of the seven key competencies in the *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023). This competency describes the development of the child 'physically, socially, emotionally and spiritually' (DE, 2023, p.11), a holistic approach that aligns closely with the aims of RE. The findings of this study emphasise the potential of RE in serving the emerging focus on wellbeing.

The data gathered shows that 30% of participants recognise the value of RE in contributing to pupil wellbeing. This recognition is supported by existing research (Meehan, 2018; Sullivan, 2017; Spencer et al., 2016), demonstrating that RE fosters spiritual wellbeing, moral development and a sense of community. This aligns with the intentions of the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (*DES, 2019), which includes being connected as an aspect of wellbeing. It also includes being resilient as evidence of wellbeing.

Participants highlighted numerous ways RE supports pupils' resilience and wellbeing by fostering strategies to manage stress and promoting holistic development. RE was seen as contributing to pupils' moral, spiritual, and emotional resilience. For example, P.10 connected RE to restorative practices and resilience, while P.5 linked RE to wellbeing, particularly in times of grief or loss. Participants, including P.5, P.3, and P.9, described RE as a source of comfort and hope during challenging times, providing pupils with something to turn to for support. P.5 and P.9 recognised RE's opportunities for reflection and meditation, aligning with the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (DES, 2019), which aims to equip pupils with stress management skills. P.5, P.9, and P.1 all highlighted the positive messages in RE, emphasising themes such as God's love, life's meaning, belonging, and connection to something greater. The links being made by participants are clear. It is evident that by addressing students' moral, spiritual, and social development, RE provides foundational skills and values that participants recognise as playing a valuable role in supporting the holistic wellbeing of pupils, aligning closely with the emerging focus on wellbeing in the *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023). The next section will discuss participants' perceptions of the *Grow in Love* programme and its success in their schools.

### 5.3.4 RE and the Grow in Love programme.

As a holistic endeavour, RE integrates cognitive learning with personal and spiritual development (Hession, 2015). Based on the *CPPRECI (*IEC, 2015), the *Grow in Love* programme encompasses learning about religious traditions, beliefs, and values while promoting pupils' spiritual growth and encouraging a deeper faith commitment. Simultaneously, it seeks to nurture pupils' faith, equipping them to embody their beliefs in daily life (IEC, 2015). The programme satisfies Patron requirements for the teaching of RE. It allows for the alignment of RE with the holistic aims of a curriculum. Intended also to fulfil the requirements 'of a more secular and belief-diverse Ireland'

(Kieran & Mullally, 2021, p.424), world religions, Islam and Judaism are incorporated into the programme from first class upwards. However, some believe this is insufficient (Fischer, 2016; Heinz et al., 2018). Most participants, 80%, in this study spoke positively regarding the programme. 40% of those interviewed described the programme as an improvement on its predecessor, the *Alive O* programme. Some participants described it as more relevant for pupils, with engaging interactive resources. The programme provides structured teaching on Catholic beliefs, values, and practices while nurturing pupils' faith and enabling them to live out their beliefs in their everyday lives (IEC, 2015). The *Grow in Love* programme is invitational and inclusive, as outlined in Chapter 2; however, the findings in this research reveal that it is not universally perceived as effective or impactful.

Data gathered from participants highlights significant differences in how the programme is perceived and delivered between junior and senior classes. In junior classes, the *Grow in Love* programme was generally spoken about positively, with 40% of participants attributing its success to the ease and simplicity of the material. The storytelling, singing, and interactive activities, such as art and role-playing, provide a light-hearted, enjoyable approach that appeals to students and teachers. For example, P.5 praised the engaging format, noting that 'the stories are done very well, the online resources are lovely.' This aligns with the shared praxis model of RE referred to in Chapter 2, which uses child-centred activities to make learning relatable and enjoyable for pupils. P.3 remarked on the programme's 'fun activity' aspect, describing it as 'light.' The participant perceives the nature of the content in junior classes to be easier to teach. The *CPPRECI* (IEC, 2015) is designed to increase in complexity and depth as children progress from infants to sixth class. Its structure ensures that the knowledge, skills, and concepts taught in RE are appropriate to the developmental stages of children, with foundational concepts introduced in the early years built on sequentially to allow for more complex theological and moral principles to be addressed in the later years. For instance, the strand Mystery of God at junior level introduces 14 concepts, for example, 'God is my friend' *CPPRECI* (IEC, 2015, p.53). At senior level, the strand Mystery of God introduces 22 concepts, for example, 'the mystery of the Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith and of Christian life' (IEC, 2015, p.107). This exponential growth in the curriculum may explain why participants in this study observed a greater likelihood of RE being taught in the junior classes compared to the senior classes. On the other hand, the data suggest that teachers feeling unprepared through lack of CPD or training around the programme and fear of potential

questions from older children, is the substantial issue, rather than the programme itself. In junior and senior infants, the curriculum focuses on foundational religious knowledge, such as simple prayers, stories from the Bible and the basic concept of God as a loving Father. The emphasis is on fostering a sense of wonder, belonging, and gratitude. Infants learn short prayers, such as the Sign of the Cross, and hear stories introducing God's love in tangible ways. In senior classes, the curriculum focuses on more abstract and complex theological and ethical concepts, such as the nature of the Trinity, deeper insights into the sacraments, social justice, and moral decision-making informed by faith. Pupils are expected to engage in more critical thinking, reflection, and applying religious principles to their lives. For example, in 6th class, pupils explore moral issues, such as caring for creation, global justice, and making ethical decisions inspired by the life and teachings of Jesus. Additionally, P.8 believed that the pedagogy adopted in junior classes resulted in 'stronger' engagement by teachers. However, the programme adopts the same pedagogical approach throughout all classes. As such, the *Grow in Love* programme is an educational programme that should be accessible to all (Hession, 2015).

Based on the findings in this research, the success of the *Grow in Love* programme in senior classes appears more limited. 30% of participants reported reluctance among senior-class teachers to engage with the programme fully; this disparity is primarily attributed to variations in content complexity and teacher confidence and a lack of training and development. P.3 and P.5 highlighted the 'heavier' subject matter in senior classes, where they reported that more abstract theological concepts are introduced. It is apparent from participants that they believe that some teachers have trouble navigating class discussions, particularly those who may not feel confident in their own theological knowledge. P.3 specifically mentioned that teachers avoid difficult questions from students. However, this should not be the case as, in fact, the key characteristics of the pedagogical approach in the *Grow in Love* programme focus on respect, invitation and conversation (IEC, 2015). This approach advocates respect for the views of all, inviting pupils to 'wonder about the material' and promoting a classroom that is a 'safe place for conversation' (IEC, 2015, p11). As with all curriculum subjects, there is no presumption that the teacher would have all the answers. The findings suggest that many senior-class teachers feel unprepared to handle the depth of religious concepts introduced in the later stages of the programme, particularly when faced with students who are more likely to question or challenge the teachings critically. This is concerning as this may lead to a dilution of the programme's content and purpose. As P.10 pointed out, RE

offers opportunities to develop a sense of belonging and purpose. However, these benefits are more difficult to realise when teachers feel underprepared to guide older students through nuanced conversations about faith. The reluctance among senior-class teachers to engage with the *Grow in Love* programme also reflects the broader challenge of RE in contemporary classrooms. Teachers in senior classes frequently deal with students who have developed critical thinking skills and may question religious doctrines. As the programme moves to discussions on morality, ethics, and personal faith, teachers must navigate difficult questions while ensuring they foster an inclusive and respectful learning environment. According to participants, many teachers may feel they lack the necessary skills to navigate such situations, contributing to the avoidance or superficial teaching of RE content in senior classes. 90% of participants reported that their teachers did not receive any training following the introduction of the *Grow in Love* programme for senior classes. This could account for the lack of confidence in teachers at this level, as reported by participants. This highlights the urgent need for additional teacher support and training to ensure the programme can be effective across all levels.

90% of participants cannot recall training for the *Grow in Love* programme beyond junior classes. However, P.5 indicated that their diocese provides ongoing training for teachers. P.5 showed an awareness of the perception that the programme becomes more challenging as students move up through the school, with RE content evolving into topics that explore 'theological understandings, dogma, and complex religious teachings.' However, this participant also recognised that the programme is accessible to all teachers, including those who may not be from a faith perspective. This demonstrates a better understanding of the programme's pedagogical approaches, thus suggesting that the training provided for the programme by the diocese has enabled the participant to be knowledgeable about its implementation. P. 5's observations highlight the pedagogical flexibility of the *Grow in Love* programme, which enables teachers, regardless of their personal faith positions, to deliver RE effectively. This flexibility lies in its structured, teacher-friendly design that focuses on facilitating learning outcomes and faith formation through practical, adaptable teaching strategies. The ability of *Grow in Love* to bridge the gap between personal belief and professional practice is significant in addressing the challenges posed by declining religiosity among educators. This suggests that teachers need constant support and training regarding the programme with a focus not just on the programme's content but also on teaching

methodologies developments in order for RE to remain vibrant and relevant in a modern classroom.

### 5.3.5 Sacramental preparation

A central aspect of RE is fostering an understanding of and engagement with the Church's sacraments (IEC, 2015). However, 80% of the participants focused on the sacramental ceremonies when discussing sacramental preparation. Traditionally, sacramental preparation occurs in Catholic primary schools as part of the RE programme. As a core feature in the life of a Catholic primary school, it has become a contentious issue considering the increased number of pupils who are non-Catholic, according to Faas et al., 2020. However, some argue that First Confession and First Communion in second class and Confirmation in sixth class remain key celebrations in the school calendar because they are 'a salient part of Irish cultural identity' (Faas et al., 2020, p.610). Involvement in sacramental celebrations is as much cultural as it is about faith formation (Faas et al., 2018). This tension was reflected in the findings of this study where, for instance, P.6 described sacramental ceremonies as resembling a 'production,' where the school's focus is more on the external presentation of the event rather than its spiritual significance. Similarly, 40% of participants highlighted how the emphasis on rehearsals and ceremonial performance overshadowed the sacrament's deeper spiritual meaning. This reflects the cultural weight placed on these events, as described by Kitching and Shanneik (2015), where the significance of First Holy Communion lies in its societal rather than theological value.

80% of participants referred to the considerable time spent preparing students for these ceremonies. This resonates with the literature from Chapter 2, an example of which is the INTO (2012) survey, which found that 70% of teachers spend additional time on sacramental preparation beyond the two and a half hours allocated for RE. As described by the participants, sacramental preparation primarily focuses on instructing students in the ceremonial aspects, such as rehearsing prayers, readings, and behaviours during Mass, rather than educating them about the underlying spiritual significance and rationale behind receiving the sacrament. This is not what sacramental preparation is intended to be. The purpose of sacramental preparation is not only to prepare students for meaningful participation in their First Holy Communion and Confirmation. Ideally, it is meant to deepen their understanding of the spiritual and religious significance of these sacraments, fostering a connection to their faith and the Catholic community while also preparing

them for the practical and ceremonial aspects. In the *Grow in Love* programme, sacramental preparation begins in Junior Infants, where they start to learn about the Mass and is developed throughout subsequent classes. The significant focus on sacramental preparation and the substantial time allocated to it often raises concerns about the place of RE within schools (Faas et al., 2020). This is reflected in the findings, where 80% of participants report that the lead-up to sacraments like First Holy Communion and Confirmation often becomes dominated by rehearsals and practical arrangements for the ceremonies. The findings highlight the discrepancy between what is intended as RE and what is being practised, with sacramental preparation often resembling more of a 'production' than a religious event, as noted by P.6. This shift from RE to performance aligns with Kitching and Shanneik's (2015) observation that the celebration of sacraments, particularly First Holy Communion, is often more about cultural tradition than genuine religious practice. The ceremonies are viewed as important milestones in a child's development, regardless of the family's level of church attendance or religious observance. It is apparent from the findings that this cultural dimension places a significant burden on schools to ensure that the ceremony goes smoothly, often at the expense of focusing on the deeper religious meaning of the sacraments. As highlighted in the findings, 40% of participants expressed concern that the emphasis on ceremonial performance detracted from the spiritual understanding of the sacraments.

The literature also points to a growing movement toward shifting the responsibility for sacramental preparation away from schools and back to the parish and family. Faas (2017, 2021) argues that schools should not be the primary nurturers of faith. Instead, this role should be reclaimed by parents and parishes. This is echoed by diocesan policies, such as those in the Archdiocese of Dublin, and the findings, where participants noted that some dioceses are taking a more active role in sacramental preparation. For example, participants P.5 and P.10 reported that recent diocesan instructions have removed traditional roles such as readings and choirs from schools, transferring them to the parish. Although this initially raised concerns about diminishing the event's significance for pupils and parents, it ultimately led to more meaningful religious experiences with less pressure on students to perform. This aligns with the IEC (2010) instruction that sacramental preparation should occur within the parish's faith community, reflecting a broader shift toward parish-led sacramental education. The findings highlight that when the burden of ceremony preparation is lifted from schools, there is a positive shift in focus towards the religious and spiritual meaning of the sacraments. For instance, P.10 noted that removing the 'jobs' traditionally

assigned to students allowed them to concentrate on the sacrament. This shift reduces the sense of sacramental celebrations as a production, thus providing a more authentic religious experience for the children involved. The question also must be asked as to what happens to non-Catholic pupils during the periods spent on preparation. P.6 noted that in their school, the focus on preparing for the sacramental ceremony, particularly its performative aspects, requires significant time dedicated to practice. This participant expressed concern for non-Catholic students, suggesting that their engagement during this period is so minimal that their presence in school becomes effectively redundant. This is contrary to the stance that Catholic schools are inclusive communities that 'instil an attitude of respect for the good of the other and welcome pupils of other faiths and none' (CSP, 2016, p. 11). This resonates with Kieran and Mullally (2021, p.432), who emphasise that managing opt-outs from RE remains 'ambiguous and insufficient.' Removing the focus of sacramental preparation from the school to the parish means less risk of marginalising non-Catholic pupils.

One participant spoke of a very different experience to the others involved in this study around their experiences of sacramental preparation. P.5 provides an example of strong diocesan support for schools. This participant describes a parish, under the diocese's direction, that takes an active role in sacramental preparation and celebrations. The parish centre handles organisational aspects, such as producing booklets for First Communion and Confirmation, freeing schools from these logistical tasks. According to P.5, the focus is on ensuring the day is special for the children, emphasising their reception of the sacrament rather than their performance in the ceremony. P.5 welcomes this approach as they believe it reduces pressure on students, reinforcing the spiritual significance of the occasion. The diocese also invests significantly in RE, offering resources and consistent support to schools and principals. For instance, a diocesan-wide celebration brought together children from various parishes to share their Confirmation experiences, fostering a sense of community and faith. According to P.5, the ongoing commitment to resources and support ensures that RE remains a priority in the diocese. Such support has significantly impacted the sacramental experience for the school and the pupils.

A significant challenge identified in the literature and the findings is the decline in Mass attendance among families. This decline has resulted in the school assuming responsibility for teaching basic church behaviours and prayer responses learned previously through regular Mass attendance. In the findings, participants P.7 and P.4 reported that considerable time is now spent teaching students

how to behave in a church setting and respond appropriately during Mass because many children no longer attend Mass regularly. This reflects broader societal changes, where religious practices are less central to family life and where the role of the family in faith formation is diminishing, as evidenced by the reduction of the number of people attending Mass (See 2.8.1 from Chapter 2). The findings highlight that this increased burden on schools to teach children what would have traditionally been learned through regular Mass attendance is time-consuming and diverts attention away from RE. This aligns with Faas' (2018) critique of the appropriateness of conducting sacramental preparation in schools. He assumes that sacramental preparation is all about preparation for the sacramental ceremony.

Furthermore, he argues that this responsibility should primarily lie with families. The literature and findings illustrate that sacramental preparation in Catholic primary schools reflects the tension between tradition and change. Schools continue to play a central role in preparing students for sacramental ceremonies, focusing on performance and logistics, despite many dioceses encouraging a move away from this practice. The continued cultural importance of events like First Holy Communion ensures that schools remain heavily involved in the process. The decline in Mass attendance among families has far-reaching implications for Catholic primary schools. It reshapes the traditional roles of schools, families, and parishes in faith formation and sacramental preparation, placing increased demands on schools to act as surrogates for declining family and parish engagement. This shift diverts time and resources from the RE curriculum, perpetuating tensions between tradition and change and faith and culture. For schools to address these challenges, greater collaboration with parishes and families is needed, as well as increased support from the Patron.

### 5.3.6 Increased diversity

Increased diversity in the student population in Catholic primary schools poses a challenge to the traditional role of RE in the curriculum (Kiernan & Mullally, 2020; Dineen, 2021). The findings presented in Chapter 4 regarding diversity provide insight into the impact of increased diversity and its implication for current practices for RE in Catholic primary school settings. As noted in the literature, the rise of secularisation and immigration has introduced significant diversity into Irish classrooms. Faas et al. (2016) highlight the disparity between the dominance of denominational Catholic schools and Ireland's growing multi-ethnic, multi-religious society.

Census figures, showing a 10% decline in those identifying as Catholic and a rise in those professing no religion, demonstrate the shifting religious affiliation in Ireland (CSO, 2023). This is reinforced by participants such as P.6, who suggested that RE is not a priority in schools with diverse student bodies, and P.7, who described a student population that included 23 different faiths. The rise in diversity is coupled with the introduction of the 2018 Amendment to the Education Admissions to School Act 2016, which means that oversubscribed Catholic schools cannot prioritise enrolments of Catholic pupils over non-Catholic pupils. This creates a tension between the Catholic identity of schools and their obligation to accommodate students from other religious backgrounds or pupils with no religion. There is a mismatch between the increasingly diverse student population and the dominance of Catholic denominational schools (Griffin, 2019; Renehan & Williams, 2015). While 88.8% of primary schools in Ireland are Catholic (Department of Education, 2022), the Central Statistics Office (2023) reports a significant decline in religious affiliation, with only 68% identifying as Catholic and 14.3% identifying as having no religion. Both literature and findings recognise this as a critical issue. As Faas et al. (2020) noted, schools are left to develop their own methods of navigating the realities of this religious and cultural diversity, often without structured guidance or formal policies.

Schools are increasingly facing challenges regarding managing students who opt out of RE (Faas et al., 2016). The legal right of parents to withdraw their children from RE is clear under the Education Admissions to Schools Act (2018), yet schools lack structured guidance on how to manage this process effectively (Kieran & Mullally, 2021). No extra resources or funding is allocated to schools to accommodate these pupils. The Department of Education has not issued any guidance in this area to schools. However, in addressing issues around inclusion, diversity and management of pupils who opt out of RE classes, CSP (2015), on behalf of the Catholic Patrons, suggests a range of options for schools and parents to facilitate parents making an informed decision regarding their child's participation in RE classes (See 2.8.2 from Chapter 2). It is advised that the principal or teacher meet with the parents to facilitate sharing information regarding the provision of RE in the school (CSP, 2015). The findings illustrate a spectrum of informal approaches, with most participants managing opt-outs on a case-by-case basis. For instance, P. 1's school allowed students to wear headphones during RE lessons. At the same time, P.3 and P.7 provided differentiated work for students who remained in the classroom but did not participate in the RE lesson.

The findings also reveal a tension between the schools' desire to be inclusive and their commitment to maintaining a Catholic ethos. This tension reflects broader societal shifts, where public opinion has moved away from traditional Catholic values, as evidenced by the support for marriage equality and abortion referenda (Kowalski, 2020).

Moreover, the disconnect between the RE curriculum and the lived experiences of an increasingly secular pupil body (Kieran & Mullally, 2020) further complicates the task of creating an inclusive educational environment. The challenge of managing diversity within Catholic primary schools goes beyond accommodating opt-outs; it also touches on broader inclusivity issues. Participants highlighted the lack of formal training or resources to deal with the practicalities of managing a diverse pupil body. This lack of preparedness leaves schools to navigate diversity on their own, resulting in a patchwork of practices that may not fully address the needs of non-Catholic pupils.

### 5.3.7 Implications of teachers' personal beliefs for the teaching of RE.

In exploring RE practices in Catholic primary schools, this research engaged with principals around the willingness of teachers to teach RE, which incorporates a key faith formation element. The *Grow in Love* programme delineates between learning outcomes and faith formation goals. It is not inconceivable that teachers who hold personal beliefs contrary to that of the Catholic faith would struggle with this faith formation element (Sheridan, 2022). The literature explored in Chapter 2 emphasises that the teacher's role in religious education is pivotal. It is through the teacher that the RE curriculum is communicated to pupils. This expectation, evident in the RE programme *Grow in Love*, assumes that the teacher embodies and transmits the Catholic faith to the students (IEC, 2017). As Mahon and O'Connell (2015) assert, the teacher is critical in delivering religious education and ensuring that the faith behind the curriculum is brought to life. However, this is complicated by the emerging disconnect between teachers' personal faith and their professional responsibilities.

O'Connell (2018) and Dineen (2021) note that many teachers may not hold personal faith commitments that align with the ethos of Catholic education. This echoes the concerns raised by the findings, where 50% of participants expressed some concern over teachers' lack of personal faith. According to Sloan et al. (2021), while most teachers in Catholic primary schools identify as Catholic, only a small percentage regularly practise their faith. The disconnect between teachers'

personal beliefs and the religious expectations placed on them in schools may contribute to the more informal, flexible approaches to RE noted in the findings. For example, P.3 and P.2 described how RE was treated as 'a la carte' or as a 'dip in, dip out' subject. The concept of 'box-ticking' mentioned by P.3 reflects this compliance without conviction, where teachers fulfil basic responsibilities without a genuine engagement in the spiritual dimension of their roles. This echoes Heinz et al.'s (2018) findings that teachers often conform to the status quo of teaching RE without necessarily subscribing to the faith itself.

Teachers' willingness to comply with the school's expectations regarding the teaching of RE is not necessarily negative since teachers are expected to comply with the expectations of meeting targets in other curricular areas. However, as reported by all participants in this research, teachers are not meeting the expectations regarding the time allocation for RE; therefore, they are not compliant. Furthermore, P.6 and P.3 are concerned that teachers are avoiding teaching RE because they lack a personal faith commitment. This reflects findings by Ó Caoimh et al. (2024), which indicate that 40% of the teachers involved in their study teach RE twice per week or less, and a lack of personal faith or commitment is identified as a key reason for their non-fulfilling of the requirement. This concern is reflected in P. 6's comment about the need to 'decouple compliance from conviction' where this compliance is not grounded in a genuine conviction about the value or importance of RE. If teachers simply fulfil duties to avoid conflict, the sustainability of RE as a meaningful educational pursuit is called into question. O'Connell (2018) and Dineen (2021) point out that the growing detachment from the religious ethos among teachers could erode the integrity of RE over time.

School leaders find themselves under increasing pressure to ensure that staff in their schools understand and appreciate what the ethos of a Catholic primary school means (O'Connell et al., 2021). Indications are that while many younger teachers profess an openness to a belief in God, they do not subscribe in the same numbers to the teachings of the Catholic religious tradition (Meehan & O'Connell, 2021). A study by Heinz et al. 2018, which looked at newly qualified teachers' attitudes to teaching RE, recognises a degree of compliance among student teachers concerning teaching RE. Some students and newly qualified teachers conceal their true beliefs and opinions about their religious commitment to not jeopardise their employment opportunities (Heinz et al., 2018). Teachers must hold an appropriate certificate to teach RE (See 2.8.3). Some

evidence suggests that this certificate is not a suitable means of preparation for non-Catholic teachers to adequately support pupils in their religious development (Milliken et al., 2021). Furthermore, as noted by O'Connell et al. (2023), initial teacher training is insufficient to sustain any teacher throughout their teaching career in any subject. However, the requirement to hold a certificate to teach RE in a Catholic primary school, representing 88.5% of primary schools (DE, 2022), means that teachers must obtain this religious certificate to ensure their employment prospects are maximised. While teachers may comply with the requirement to obtain a certificate to teach Catholic RE, there is no evidence that there is a sustained programme for CPD to support ongoing engagement and enrichment for teachers throughout their teaching careers.

However, one notable exception was presented in this research's findings. P.5 described robust diocesan support, which, in their opinion, enables teachers to implement the *Grow in Love* programme effectively. Through targeted professional development, including training and access to resources, the diocese addressed issues of teacher anxiety and lack of confidence in delivering RE. P.5 highlighted that teaching RE does not require a personal religious conviction. Professional competence in teaching RE can be attained by acquiring appropriate skills and knowledge. In this way, decoupling religious conviction from professional competence is possible. The support described by P.5 provides teachers with the tools to meet the RE curriculum's objectives while fostering an inclusive teaching environment. This example highlights the transformative potential of structured professional development in mitigating the challenges of teaching RE in Catholic schools. The diocesan support equipped teachers with practical skills and instilled confidence, promoting a sense of professional agency. As such, this example of good practice could serve as a model for other dioceses seeking to address the challenges posed by declining faith adherence among teachers while ensuring that the RE curriculum remains robust and effective.

### 5.3.8 Continuing Professional Development for RE.

CPD is recognised worldwide as a significant priority in education systems to enhance teaching practices and improve pupil learning outcomes (Banks & Smyth, 2011; Sugure, 2002). However, the findings in this research echo O'Farrell (2023, p.7), where CPD for RE is described as 'sparse and haphazard'. Meehan et al. (2024) also highlight the deficiencies in the provision of CPD for RE. The absence of structured, high-quality training and continuing professional development are critical factors in teachers' failure to effectively teach RE (Dineen, 2021; O'Connell, 2018).

Without structured CPD beyond initial teacher training, many teachers are underprepared to deliver RE effectively throughout their careers (Dineen, 2021; O'Connell, 2018). The findings in this research echo these concerns. As discussed, only one participant, P.5, noted comprehensive support and ongoing in-service training for the *Grow in Love* programme in their diocese. 90% of participants reported minimal or no CPD related to RE. For example, P.1 and P.2 noted that aside from initial training for the programme, subsequent opportunities for CPD were effectively non-existent. As discussed earlier in this chapter, to empower teachers to teach the *Grow in Love* programme successfully, ongoing CPD is crucial (Meehan & O'Connell, 2021; Kieran & McDonagh, 2021; Kieran & Mullally, 2021). Dineen (2021) and Meehan and O'Connell (2021) highlight that many teachers feel underprepared for teaching RE, especially when their own faith commitment is lacking. Without adequate training, the expectation that teachers will deliver meaningful RE and contribute to faith formation becomes unrealistic. Byrne and Sweetman (2019) also stress the importance of high-quality CPD in enhancing teachers' impact on student learning and encouraging their commitment to the subject.

The inequality in the provision of CPD between RE and other subjects (See 2.8.3 from Chapter 2) is also reflected in the findings. P.3 contrasted the extensive CPD provided for the introduction of the *Primary Language Curriculum* (DES, 2019) and the *Primary Mathematics Curriculum* (2023), while RE training was limited to a single in-service day for *Grow in Love*. This comparative neglect only compounds the idea that RE is often treated as a peripheral subject rather than a core component of the primary school curriculum. 100% of participants recognised the value of CPD, but 90% expressed frustration at its limited availability. This mirrors the call for a more systematic approach to ongoing in-service training for RE, which could address the current gaps and improve teacher engagement (Meehan & O'Connell, 2021; Kieran & Mullally, 2021). Again, P.5 was an outlier: this participant alone spoke of their diocese providing EPV-approved CPD in RE. The absence of Extra Personal Vacation (EPV) days (See 4.5.3 from Chapter 4) for RE-related CPD was a concern for two participants. P.8 and P.9 suggested that providing EPV days for Department of Education-approved RE courses could improve teachers' attitudes towards undertaking CPD in this area.

Participants highlighted the need for CPD in RE, identifying key areas for support: Training in the *Grow in Love* programme (50%), development of school ethos (40%), and inclusion of non-

Catholic pupils (20%). The call for CPD on school ethos (40%) highlights the increasing pressure on schools to maintain a cohesive identity amidst growing diversity. This reflects a need for schools to articulate and practice their ethos in ways that resonate with Catholic and non-Catholic stakeholders. CPD focused on ethos could help staff navigate challenges in aligning their practices with the school's values in a time of increased classroom diversity. That 20% call for CPD on inclusion highlights the growing impact of the changing demographics in Catholic schools. It highlights the need for CPD to address inclusion and engagement with pupils of other faiths or no faith. This area of CPD is critical to equip staff with the skills and understanding needed to foster an inclusive environment while respecting the school's Catholic ethos. Participants' widespread dissatisfaction with the availability of CPD (90%) reveals a systemic failure to support educators in navigating the complexities of modern RE. This lack of provision could hinder teachers' ability to effectively deliver RE, particularly as expectations around inclusion, ethos, and pedagogical innovation grow. While all participants recognised the value of CPD, the findings expose significant gaps in its provision, highlighting the urgent need for systemic reform and targeted interventions to ensure teachers are well-equipped to ensure RE remains relevant and vibrant in classrooms in the future.

#### 5.3.9 Oversight of RE

As outlined in the literature, Catholic primary schools are managed by a board of management on behalf of the Patron. Section 15 of the Education Act 1998 states that the board is accountable to the Patron for maintaining the school ethos. To be held accountable suggests that there is an obligation on the board of management to engage with a system which is subject to external scrutiny and requires explanation and justification of past behaviour, decisions and results with potential consequences for the outcomes (Duffy et al., 2024). To be held accountable also suggests that there should be some form of oversight. Theme 4.6 indicates that oversight of RE is inconsistent and lacks any of the structured accountability which is present in other curriculum areas. What follows is a discussion based on the core findings in this regard.

##### 5.3.9.1 Internal Oversight of RE

In Catholic primary schools, internal oversight of RE is intended to be carried out in the first instance by the principal, who is accountable to the board of management. However, as discussed

in 5.2, the findings in this study reveal inconsistencies and weaknesses in internal oversight regarding RE in practice. The depth and quality of reporting regarding RE is less rigorous compared to other subjects, reflecting a lack of oversight. This discrepancy in internal oversight reflects the broader challenge discussed in the literature, highlighting the absence of systematic accountability for RE (Meehan et al., 2024). None of the participants reported using formal mechanisms to assess RE learning outcomes. This further contributes to the perception that RE is a lower-priority subject, a view reflected in Sheridan (2022). Principals such as P.5, who spoke of a more engaged diocese, had access to better support structures and policy templates, highlighting that proactive involvement from a diocese can significantly impact internal oversight.

While internal oversight of RE is intended to be carried out in the first instance by the principal, the principal is subsequently accountable to the board of management. The Patron appoints the board of management to manage the school on behalf of the Patron. The functions of the board of management are set out in section 15 of the Education Act, 1998, which outlines that the board must manage the school on behalf of the Patron. Additionally, the Education Act 1998 states that the board of management is responsible for upholding the school's characteristic spirit, including religious values and traditions. Despite this, updates regarding teaching and learning in RE were not reported by 90% of participants to the board of management. This indicates a further gap in the monitoring of RE at school level. Overall, the findings show that internal oversight of RE in Catholic primary schools is inconsistent and largely informal, failing to ensure robust implementation and accountability for the subject.

#### 5.3.9.2 External Oversight of RE

The Department of Education Inspectorate does not include RE in their curriculum inspections (See 2.10.1.2 from Chapter 2), a marked difference from other subjects (Meehan et al., 2024). Instead, the responsibility for overseeing RE falls to the Patron, who follows a model of support rather than inspection (Sexton & McCormack, 2021). The findings indicate that diocesan oversight, where present, is primarily supportive and advisory rather than evaluative. The role of the Diocesan Advisor (DA), who visits schools periodically to observe the work of teachers regarding the RE programme, was the primary form of external oversight mentioned. Such visits are intended to provide guidance and support rather than taking the form of formal inspections (Sexton & McCormack, 2021). However, the frequency and impact of these visits varied. 30% of

participants mentioned the DA visiting the school, with 2 participants describing these visits as causing a temporary flurry of activity in preparation for their arrival. There was no real sense of accountability tied to these visits, as the DA did not assess the quality of teaching or student outcomes in RE.

In P. 5's school, a more substantial level of diocesan involvement was described, with the diocese providing templates for RE policy and requiring schools to submit their policies for approval. This represents a more structured form of external oversight, which most schools appeared to lack. For 90% of participants, external oversight from the Patron was either non-existent or purely nominal, with little focus on evaluating RE's teaching and learning. For example, P.6 described teachers' compliance with RE requirements as an effort to avoid drawing negative attention from the Patron rather than a genuine engagement with the subject. This lack of structured oversight from the Patron and the DA on behalf of the Patron contrasts sharply with the inspection models adopted by the Department of Education Inspectorate. Overall, the findings align with the literature's assertion that the external oversight of RE in Catholic primary schools is weak and inconsistent. 70% of participants indicated that time for RE was eroded by curriculum overload and time pressures, and 30% specifically mentioned prioritising literacy and numeracy over RE. There is a clear indication that teachers and principals justify neglect of RE because it is not assessed or its outcomes measured and reported in the same way that literacy and numeracy outcomes are reported. Without formal inspection mechanisms and any form of assessment, RE continues to be marginalised within the curriculum (Sheridan, 2022). While well-intentioned, the supportive model adopted by dioceses needs more rigour to ensure that RE is taught effectively and with the same attention as other curriculum subjects.

### 5.4 Implications of Curriculum Developments for RE

The third area of focus for this research centred on participants' perceptions of how recent developments in the primary curriculum impact the practices of RE in their schools. The *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023) was launched in 2023. Two changes within this framework directly involve RE and its place in the curriculum. The term Religion/Ethical/Multi-belief and Values Education – The Patron's Programme has replaced the term RE. There is also a reduction in the time allocated to RE from two and a half hours to two hours per week. Although 60% of participants believed the reduced allocation would not

significantly alter the actual time devoted to RE, their responses highlight a shared apprehension about its symbolic implications. For example, participants such as P.1 and P.8 interpreted the reduction as signalling a devaluation of RE within the curriculum. This interpretation resonates with Bacchi's (2000) notion that policy reflects social values, suggesting that the reduction may reflect a broader societal trend away from prioritising RE. Moreover, P.7 and P.5 expressed fears of a 'slippery slope' effect, where reduced formal time could further erode RE's significance in practice. This aligns with Ball's (2016) view that policy changes, even when seemingly minor, can reflect and perpetuate broader ideological shifts.

The *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023) promotes integrated learning, emphasising holistic and cross-curricular educational approaches (See 2.10 from Chapter 2). While integration fosters cross-curricular connections (DE, 2023), the explicit separation of RE from the integrated curriculum framework may undermine its relevance. This perceived marginalisation is exacerbated by its association with non-academic activities like roll call and recreation. P5 and P3 were concerned that RE would be replaced or further marginalised within the curriculum. This aligns with Gleeson et al. (2020), who warn of a narrowing curriculum that prioritises measurable subjects, thus neglecting a more holistic approach. This outcomes-based approach to learning places an emphasis on cognitive learning and appears to neglect the spiritual dimension of children's learning. As outlined in the *CPPRECI* (IEC, 2015), RE seeks to foster pupils' spiritual, moral, and religious development. The structure of the *CPPRECI* (IEC, 2015), which outlines clear learning outcomes for each strand, provides opportunities for assessing both knowledge and skills, fostering a balanced approach that aligns with the dual goals of RE and faith formation.

Furthermore, the current shift in emphasis, which appears to prioritise measurable outcomes in literacy and numeracy, has the potential to neglect holistic aspects of a child's education at primary level. Other subjects that experienced reductions in time, such as Physical Education and Irish education, can benefit from the integrated curriculum through their positioning in the *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023). However, they may also succumb to neglect in favour of literacy and numeracy, which are measured and the results reported to the Department of Education. Despite concerns, RE's alignment with the principles of the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (DES, 2018) offers a potential avenue

for reaffirming its value within the curriculum. By fostering holistic development, spiritual, moral, and social, RE can substantively serve the area of wellbeing (Meehan, 2018; De Souza, 2016). However, the reduced time allocation may limit RE's ability to deliver these outcomes comprehensively.

Threaded throughout the findings is the view that society and its attitude to religion have changed. Participants perceive these changes as reflecting the diminishing emphasis on RE within a more diverse and secular society. The decline in the importance of religious affiliation, as evidenced by the decreased numbers attending Mass (See 2.8.1 from Chapter 2), reflects the broader societal changes that the curriculum now appears to set out to accommodate. Additionally, as previously discussed in this chapter, the findings suggest that teachers and principals rationalise the neglect of RE, as it lacks the formal assessment, measurement, and reporting structures characterising literacy and numeracy outcomes. Overall, participants did not see a significant practical impact from the reduced time allocated to RE as they were unanimous in their agreement that the time requirement for RE was not being met. Without strategic interventions by the Patron to address these challenges, the role of RE risks further marginalisation, calling into question its future relevance in a rapidly evolving educational landscape.

Participants were less concerned about the change in terminology, with 50% viewing the change as positive. The term reflects the fact that there are multiple patronages in primary education in Ireland. The new term applies to denominational and non-denominational schools, fostering a more consistent approach across the education system. For P.5 and P.6, the new terminology signals a more inclusive approach, acknowledging the diverse faith and non-faith backgrounds of pupils and Patrons. This aligns with the ongoing debate regarding the patronage model's ability to accommodate Ireland's increasingly multi-faith society (Rougier & Honohan, 2015). P.2 and P.10 viewed the change in terminology as inconsequential in practice, suggesting that it will not alter the day-to-day implementation of RE. This pragmatic perspective highlights a potential gap between policy representation and practical outcomes, a recurring theme in educational policy analysis (Ball, 1993; Bacchi, 2000). Finally, P.3 and P.4 perceived the change in terminology as indicative of a deliberate move to diminish RE's prominence in the primary curriculum. This concern aligns with Walsh's (2018) argument that curriculum policies embody societal values and

priorities. The change in terminology might reflect an underlying policy agenda that deprioritises faith-based education, particularly within Catholic schools.

### 5.5 Conclusion

This study examined principals' perceptions regarding RE, its importance, current practices and the implications of a redeveloped primary curriculum. Principals recognise RE as significant for pupils' holistic development. However, their views often do not translate into practices that prioritise the teaching of RE. The findings illustrate a disconnect between the aspirations outlined in documents like *Share the Good News* (ICBC, 2010) and the *CPPRECI* (IEC, 2015) and the daily realities in schools. The challenges of curriculum overload, limited oversight, and outdated or absent policies highlight the need for renewed focus and accountability.

The *Grow in Love* programme presents a comprehensive approach to RE. However, the findings of this study highlight notable disparities in its implementation, particularly between junior and senior classes. While participants praise the programme for its child-centred and engaging pedagogy in junior classes, its effectiveness in senior classes is hindered by challenges related to teacher confidence, insufficient training, and the complexity of the content. Additionally, the emphasis on sacramental preparation often shifts the focus from the spiritual to the performative, reflecting broader cultural tensions and diminishing the programme's intended purpose. The findings suggest a pressing need for enhanced teacher training, diocesan support, and a recalibration of sacramental preparation responsibilities to better align with the holistic aims of the *Grow in Love* programme.

The findings also highlight the challenges of increased diversity in Catholic primary schools and their implications for RE. The systemic lack of structured and sustained CPD further exacerbates these challenges. Addressing these issues requires systemic reforms, including robust CPD frameworks and greater support for principals and teachers.

The oversight of RE in Catholic primary schools is marked by internal and external inconsistencies, revealing significant gaps in accountability and support. The principal is tasked with overseeing RE, but findings indicate a lack of formal mechanisms for planning or reporting, suggesting a failure to meet the expectations of the Patron. Recent changes in the *Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools* (DE, 2023) include reduced time

allocated to RE and a change in terminology to 'Religion/Ethical/Multi-belief and Values Education.' When coupled with its detachment from an integrated curriculum, it undermines its role in providing a holistic education for pupils. Unless Patrons make significant strategic interventions, RE risks becoming further marginalised.

The next chapter will present implications, recommendations and suggestions for future research to support RE in Catholic primary schools.

# Chapter 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

## 6.1 Introduction

This research contributes to the emerging research on RE by providing an insight into RE practices in Catholic primary schools through an examination of the views of principals. With over twenty years of experience as a Catholic primary school principal, the researcher brings an insider perspective with situational knowledge of leading and teaching in a Catholic primary school.

The research aligns with the constructionist ontology, which is based on an understanding that experiences and their meanings are created through interactions, experiences, and shared beliefs (Cresswell & Creswell, 2023). This perspective allows for an understanding of school ethos, a concept constructed within Catholic primary schools' social and cultural context. The interpretivist paradigm, which aims to understand the subjective world of human experience, further supports this study, which focuses on how individuals make sense of the world around them. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather principals' views around RE practices in their schools at a time of curriculum development and change. The principal is central in promoting RE and maintaining the ethos in Catholic primary schools. Tasked with the day-to-day management of the school (Education Act, 1998; DE, 2023), the principal's role extends beyond their administrative duties to include leadership that promotes and sustains the school's Catholic identity. By engaging with principals, the research endeavoured to uncover the implications of recent curriculum developments for RE in Catholic primary schools.

Initially this chapter will address the research aims. Following this, drawing from the findings, the chapter will explore the implications for RE. The limitations of the study will be considered followed by a brief outline of its contribution. Finally, it will conclude with considerations and recommendations that are necessary to ensure RE's continued relevance and effectiveness within an evolving educational landscape.

## 6.2 Addressing the research aims

This study aimed to investigate principals' perceptions regarding RE practices in Catholic primary schools. The research centred on three key areas: principals' views on the importance of RE within their schools, their experiences and challenges around RE practices, and their insights into the impact of recent curriculum developments that may influence the future role of RE in their schools.

These three key areas of investigation, which informed the research aim, were presented in Chapter One and have been addressed by the research process.

This study offers insights into Catholic school principals' views on RE and its role in shaping school ethos amid evolving curriculum developments. It reveals that while RE is acknowledged as a key expression of ethos, it is not generally seen as a core defining feature. The findings reveal a disconnect between the role of RE as presented by the Catholic School Partnership (CSP) and the reality in practice. *Understanding and Living the Ethos in a Catholic Primary School: A Process Centred on Conversations* (CSP, 2019). situates RE as central to the ethos of the Catholic primary school; however, the demands of the broader curriculum, with its focus on literacy and numeracy, diminish the holistic educational experience traditionally associated with Catholic education.

The findings that reveal principals' experiences of current practices around RE in their schools and their perception of the factors influencing those practices resonate with the recent GRACE research project findings. One of the most striking findings indicated that the time requirement for RE was not being adhered to. This concurs with the findings by O'Caoimh et al. (2024) and Meehan et al. (2024). Many participants in this study attribute this to curriculum overload and the pressure to prioritise subjects that contribute to measurable outcomes. This points to a broader issue with the education being provided at primary level where subjects like RE, which contribute to the child's wellbeing and holistic development, are effectively being devalued in favour of subjects directly related to achievement in standardised test scores.

### 6.3 Implications

This research uncovered inconsistencies in oversight, planning, and support for RE in Catholic primary schools.

Oversight of RE in Catholic primary schools in Ireland does not appear to be a priority. While RE is a core component of ethos (CSP, 2019), this research suggests that it is frequently neglected in favour of other curriculum areas such as literacy and numeracy, which are subject to assessment and reporting to the Department of Education. There is a definite gap in the oversight and assessment of RE when compared with other subjects. This lack of formal evaluation and accountability potentially risks relegating RE to the periphery of the curriculum. It also suggests that RE is not valued in the same way as other subject areas.

The principal is central to upholding the school's ethos and managing and promoting RE within their school. Moreover, the Patron has a legitimate expectation that principals will actively fulfil this responsibility. However, the principals who participated in this study did not appear to believe that oversight for RE was necessary. As key figures in the allocation of resources and the promotion of RE, it is the principal who must ensure that RE is supported as a key aspect of school ethos. Despite being responsible for ensuring a coordinated approach, monitoring curriculum implementation, and updating the board of management on teaching and learning in RE, the findings reveal gaps in principals' engagement with these duties. The findings suggest a lack of understanding among principals regarding their accountability to the Patron in ensuring RE requirements are met. While most principals acknowledged the importance of RE in fostering the school's ethos and supporting pupils' holistic development, this commitment did not translate into either leadership or actions that promoted RE. For instance, only 20% of participants monitored the implementation of RE, with many delegating responsibilities or treating the subject as less important when compared to curriculum areas like literacy and numeracy. Outdated RE policies and a lack of awareness or engagement with frameworks such as the CSP document is further evidence of this disconnect. Principals reported that because of competing demands, including curriculum overload and demographic shifts, the prominence of RE has decreased in school practice. The findings also reveal that principals, particularly those in administrative roles, often feel removed from classroom practices in RE, further hindering their capacity to lead and manage the subject effectively. These challenges expose a gap between aspirations and practical realities, undermining RE's role as a core expression of Catholic ethos.

The findings also highlight a gap in the external oversight of RE within Catholic primary schools which further exacerbates the lack of a sense of accountability around the effectiveness of RE. The Department of Education Inspectorate has no role in inspecting the planning, teaching and learning in RE. Responsibility for the oversight of RE lies with the Patron, whose supportive model lacks the rigour of evaluative methods seen in Department of Education inspections. Diocesan Advisors, whose visits are intended to provide support and guidance, fail to instil a meaningful sense of accountability. Without structured oversight, RE is marginalised, as teachers and principals prioritise assessed and reported subjects like literacy and numeracy. Enhanced collaboration between dioceses and schools to develop policy templates and accountability frameworks will also

be essential in restoring RE's standing and ensuring its contribution to holistic education into the future.

To ensure proper provision of RE, schools need support in developing a meaningful and comprehensive policy regarding RE that aligns with the policies required in all other curricular areas. Core documents such as the *Catholic Preschool and Primary School Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland* (IEC, 2015) and *Share the Good News: National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland* (IEC, 2010) should inform the planning for RE. This study reveals a disconnect between the intended role of RE as a core element of the ethos of Catholic primary schools and its actual implementation in these schools. Patrons have invested substantial time and finance into developing resources designed to guide schools in addressing critical matters, including preserving the school's ethos and effectively managing inclusion. Considering that most participants were not aware of Patron guidance on inclusion or sacramental preparation, it points to an issue around communication between Patrons and schools. School communities collaboratively develop and maintain planning documents for all curriculum areas. However, the findings indicate that the planning for RE is severely lacking. It is hard to see how RE can be successful when it is not adequately planned for.

High-quality CPD strengthens teachers' impact on student learning, fosters their professional growth, and deepens their commitment to their roles as educators (Byrne & Sweetman, 2019). However, it is clear from the findings of this study that targeted, ongoing CPD is not made available for principals as leaders of teaching and learning in RE or teachers who are expected to teach RE daily. The lack of meaningful CPD for teachers and principals compounds the challenges of delivering the RE programme. Teachers, especially those who lack a strong personal faith, are left unprepared and lacking confidence in delivering a subject that demands not just pedagogical competence but also an understanding and appreciation for its faith-based elements. The absence of a framework for consistent CPD directly impacts the effectiveness of RE. Along with CPD in teaching RE, support and training are also necessary to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate the complexities of teaching RE in an increasingly diverse classroom.

### 6.3.1 A model of practice

The findings of this research, drawn from the voice of principals, suggests a model of practice that supports the provision of high quality RE in Catholic primary schools. While exemplified in the experiences of one participant (P.5), the features of this model are consistent with the overarching themes that emerge from the findings. It is evident that structured, sustained diocesan support and communication enhances both teaching and leadership in RE.

Central to the success of this model of practice is the provision of practical, high-quality resources for schools by the diocese. Resources could include RE policy templates, planning templates to support both short-term and long-term planning as well as materials to support schools around sacramental preparation. Such materials should be communicated directly to schools as well as being made available on the diocesan website. In providing these resources for RE school leaders and teachers would have access to high quality, Patron approved materials for use in their schools.

Any model of good practice needs to be underpinned by a commitment to targeted and ongoing professional development. Training provided by the diocese could address concerns that emerged around teachers lacking confidence or feeling underprepared to navigate the pedagogical and theological aspects of the *Grow in Love* programme. Training provided should recognise the increasing complexity of RE as pupils progress through the school and equip teachers with the skills to deliver RE effectively, regardless of their own personal faith perspective.

Clear and regular communication between the diocese and the school needs to be a core feature of this model of practice. Principals that are well informed about diocesan expectations, resources and supports are better placed to fulfil their leadership role in resourcing and promoting RE, which in turn supports them in upholding the ethos of the school. Such enhanced communication would serve to address the findings on this research which indicated a lack of clarity among principals around their accountability to the Patron in relation to RE.

The benefit of parish involvement in sacramental preparation is highlighted by a number of participants. Collaboration between home, school and parish needs to be encouraged. This can be achieved by engaging parish choirs and readers as well as parish offices in providing printed resources for the celebration. Their involvement supports the efforts of the school, reduces pressure on school staff and allows for a more spiritual focus for the pupils involved.

Overall, the model highlights the potential for Patron led interventions to address many of the challenges identified in this research, including teachers' lack of confidence, and insufficient RE training. It is evident that by adopting a proactive and structured approach, dioceses can play a key role in ensuring RE remains vibrant and relevant in Catholic primary schools. Without this input, RE risks being pushed further to the periphery.

### 6.4 Limitations

Semi-structured interviews were employed in this study to gain insights into Catholic primary school principals' views on RE as a key expression of ethos. This method allowed for an in-depth exploration of principals' understanding of ethos, the role of RE as an expression of ethos, their experiences with current RE practices, and their perceptions of recent curriculum developments impacting RE. The semi-structured format, highlighted by Flick (2006), facilitates open-ended questions that reveal the interviewees' viewpoints in a less formal setting. This method is beneficial for uncovering nuanced opinions and experiences (Bryman, 2004; Denscombe, 2014). However, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. The potential for interviewer bias exists, given the researcher's insider position. Furthermore, the subjective nature of semi-structured interviews may lead to variability in data collection, which could impact the consistency of findings. The small sample size of only ten participants limits the generalisability of the findings, as this sample may not represent the diverse perspectives and practices across all Catholic primary schools in Ireland.

Due to the nature of this study, with its focus on the perceptions of principals, the views of other stakeholders would undoubtedly enrich this area of research, particularly the voice of the child. This is potentially an area for further research. Additionally, having just one respondent from each of the seven dioceses means that the findings are based on a single viewpoint per diocese, which could result in an incomplete picture of each diocese. The representation of only seven dioceses further limits the study's scope, as all dioceses' perspectives and unique practices are not represented. These factors may result in findings that may not fully capture the range of attitudes or practices regarding RE across all dioceses in Ireland. Despite these limitations, the semi-structured interviews provided valuable insights into the principals' perspectives on RE and its role in maintaining the ethos of Catholic primary schools, contributing significantly to the research's overall findings.

## 6.5 Contribution

This research contributes valuable perspectives to the field of RE, particularly within the context of Irish Catholic primary schools. It provides insights into the perspectives of Catholic primary school principals regarding practices in RE. It highlights the challenges schools face in prioritising RE amidst curriculum changes and increased diversity. By examining principals' views on recent curriculum developments, this research demonstrates the potential challenges these changes pose to maintaining a Catholic ethos. It provides an insight into the potential impact of the separation of RE from the integrated curriculum and the implications of a reduced RE time allocation. The study highlights the importance of RE in fostering a holistic educational experience for pupils that includes spiritual development. It also brings attention to the need for more structured support and professional development for principals and teachers to deliver RE effectively, particularly in increasingly diverse classroom environments.

## 6.6 Considerations

As this is a bounded case study limited by the factors outlined in 6.4, findings are not generalisable. However, as many of the findings resonate with, and build on, those of the recent GRACE research (O'Connell et al, 2024) some areas for consideration for Catholic primary school patrons are proposed.

- It is important that principals receive targeted professional development to enhance their leadership and management of RE. Principals need to be provided with practical tools and resources in order to prioritise RE effectively. Training should focus on promoting and resourcing RE as a key aspect of the school ethos and fostering engagement with existing frameworks such as those provided by the CSP. Additionally, Patrons should prioritise ongoing CPD for teachers. It is crucial to equip teachers with the confidence and theological understanding necessary to engage meaningfully with pupils, particularly those in senior classes where the *Grow in Love* programme material becomes more complex.

- It is recommended that Patrons and schools establish accountability mechanisms for RE. Accountability structures like those used for other curriculum areas must be introduced. Regular monitoring, evaluation, and a formal reporting process should be implemented to ensure that RE policies and practices are consistently maintained. It is essential to review

and update RE policies regularly and ensure that principals and teachers are equipped to balance RE with the demands of other curriculum areas. Increased collaboration between Patrons, school boards of management, and principals is important to ensure alignment of goals and resources.

- Communication channels between Patrons and schools need to be reviewed and redeveloped. This study reveals a communication deficit, which is in stark contrast to the communication and impact of curricular and policy updates from the Department of Education.

**6.7 Recommendations for future research.**

- The establishment of communities of practice for RE is worthy of further research. Such communities, established by Patrons, would provide opportunities for principals, teachers, and DAs to regularly engage in dialogue about best practices, innovative pedagogical approaches, and strategies for addressing challenges in RE. By fostering a supportive network, such communities have the potential to empower teachers, particularly those lacking confidence in RE, to approach the subject with greater assurance and creativity.

- Future research should explore the relationship between RE and student wellbeing, investigating how a holistic educational approach which incorporates RE in the curriculum supports students' overall development. RE significantly supports pupils' emotional, social, and spiritual wellbeing. This connection strengthens the argument for preserving and expanding the role of RE in a primary curriculum. Emphasising the role of RE in promoting well-being enables Catholic primary schools to reaffirm the importance of attending to the holistic development of the child.

- Future studies could investigate the long-term impact of recent curriculum changes on RE practices in Catholic primary schools. This could involve longitudinal studies to assess how these changes affect RE practices and the role of RE as a key aspect of school ethos over a period of time.

## 6.8 Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into the perceptions and practices of principals regarding RE within Catholic primary schools. It highlights the significant challenges faced in promoting and prioritising RE amidst evolving curricular demands, societal changes, and competing priorities within the broader education system. RE in Catholic primary schools represents more than a subject within the curriculum. It nurtures pupils' spiritual, moral, and emotional growth and cultivates the distinctive ethos of Catholic primary schools. However, without targeted interventions and increased support, RE risks becoming marginalised, compromising the holistic educational endeavour that Catholic schools strive to uphold. Addressing the challenges identified in this research and attending to the considerations proposed will ensure that RE remains central to Catholic primary education in Ireland.

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## Appendix A: Consent Form

**Title of Study:** Current Practices in Religious Education in Catholic Primary Schools: Perspectives of Principals

**Research Aims:**

1. To investigate principals' views on the importance of the subject of RE in their schools.
2. To investigate principals' experiences of current practices around RE in their schools and their perception of the factors that influence those practices.
3. To investigate how principals perceive recent developments in the primary curriculum impacting the practices in RE in their schools.

**University:** Dublin City University, School of Education Studies

**Researcher:** Miriam McCabe (Student, Professional Doctoral Programme)

***Participant – please complete the following*** (*Circle Yes or No for each question*)

i. I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me)
Yes/No
ii. I understand the information provided
Yes/No
iii. I understand the information provided in relation to data protection
Yes/No
iv. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study
Yes/No
v. I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions
Yes/No
vi. I am aware that my interview will be recorded
Yes/No
vii. I understand that involvement in the research study is voluntary
Yes/No
viii. I understand I may withdraw from the research at any time
Yes/No
ix. I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me) and I understand that

legal limitations may exist around the confidentiality of data
Yes/No

x. I understand that my data will be destroyed should I withdraw consent from the research or at the end of the lifespan of the research
Yes/No

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

Participants Signature:

Name in Block Capitals: Date: Witness

## Appendix B: Plain Language Statement

*Current Practices in Religious Education in Catholic Primary Schools: Perspectives of Principals*

*This research is being carried out by myself, Miriam McCabe (doctoral student in the Institute of Education, Dublin City University) under the supervision of Dr Amalee Meehan and Dr Cora O'Farrell.*

*The research being conducted forms part of my EdD thesis [and ethical approval for this research project has been obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Dublin City University.]*

Email:

Mobile number: XXX

Dear _____

My name is Miriam McCabe and I am currently a doctoral student (EdD) in the Institute of Education, Dublin City University (DCU). As part of my doctoral studies, I am conducting research to ascertain Current Practices in Religious Education in Catholic Primary Schools: Perspectives of Principals.

My supervisors for this research project are Dr Amalee Meehan and Dr Cora O'Farrell (*School of Human Development, DCU*).

The study concentrates on three primary areas of investigation: the principals' perspectives on the significance of Religious Education (RE) within their schools, their experiences with current RE practices and the factors they perceive as influencing these practices, and their interpretations of recent developments in the primary curriculum and the resulting impact on RE practices within their institutions.

This research project will take the form of semi-structured interviews. Participants in the semi-structured interviews are asked to agree to participate in an interview (in person or via the virtual

platform Zoom) that will be approx. 50 minutes in duration. It is important to emphasise that participants are not required to answer any questions they may wish not to answer. A list of the interview questions will be provided to participants prior to the interview. The interview will be arranged for a day and time suitable to the participant.

*About the interview*

This interview will be recorded. The transcript of this interview will be provided to participants prior to any data analysis occurring to ensure accuracy, together with, allowing the participant to correct or amend any part of their contribution. If participants wish not to be recorded, it can be arranged where the notes of the interview will be handwritten by myself the interviewer.

*Confidentiality*

The identity of participants and the school they are referring to will be fully pseudonymised and the identity of participants and schools will only be known to myself and my two supervisors. Participants' names and schools will not appear in the thesis or any other documents emanating from this research.

It is however important to outline that confidentiality of information can only be protected within the limitations of the law - i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions.

The analysis and transcribing of the interview will be done by the researcher. It is anticipated that interviews will be conducted either in person or via Zoom.us.

*Data Protection*

The Data Controller will be Dublin City University. The Data Processor is myself, Miriam McCabe. The Data Protector Officer of Dublin City University is Mr Martin Ward. Mr Ward may be contacted as follows:

- data.protection@dcu.ie
- Telephone: (01) 7005118 / (01) 7008257)

The data collected during this interview process is necessary so as to collect the views and opinions of the participants so as to analyse the data and responses in order to answer the research question.

All participant's details will be pseudonymised by the assignment of a code, the details associated with such codes will be stored in a password protected document on a password protected computer in the home of the researcher, known only to the researcher and supervisors. It is also important to highlight that given the number of potential participants, this may have implications for anonymity.

The opinions and comments expressed by the participants and used in the dissertation, or any associated academic papers or articles will be anonymised.

Data will be securely stored in a password protected file in a password protected computer for the lifespan on the research. It is anticipated that the lifetime of this research is 2 years. In the unlikely event that this research project continues after 2 years all participants will be requested for their permission for the data to be stored for an additional period of three months. At the end of the research project all data will be destroyed by the researcher, Miriam McCabe. No electronic or hard copies of the data will be maintained, all data will be fully erased.

Participants in the research have the right to lodge a complaint with the Irish Data Protection Commissioner (www.dataprotection.ie)

Should participants wish to access their own personal data, this access can be requested by contacting the Data Protection Unit of Dublin City University ( https://www.dcu.ie/ocoo/data-protection)

*Participation in the research*

Participation in this research project is voluntary. ***All participants have the right to withdraw consent from the research at any stage***. Participants should contact the researcher, Miriam McCabe at the above contact details to do this. In the event that a participant withdraws from the research, all data previously collected from the participant will be destroyed within 3 days of notice

of withdrawal being received. Participants will receive written confirmation of their withdrawal from the project and confirmation that all data collected from the participant has been destroyed. The participation of the participant will cease immediately upon receipt of confirmation of request to withdraw from the research.

Participation in this research will assist in understanding the implications of the proposed redrafting of the primary curriculum for Catholic schools in the Irish education system. This information will be valuable to Catholic school Patrons in planning supports for Catholic schools. Upon completion of the research, all participants will be sent a copy of the research findings and recommendations.

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

The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, e-mail rec@dcu.ie

Yours sincerely

# Appendix C: Ethical Approval

Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University

DCU

**Dr Amalee Meehan**
School of Human Development

22nd November 2022

| | |
|---|---|
| **REC Reference:** | **DCUREC/2022/176** |
| **Proposal Title:** | **The potential effect of recent developments in Religious Education on Catholic primary schools ethos - the views of principals** |
| **Applicant(s):** | **Dr Amalee Meehan, Ms Miriam McCabe, Dr Cora O'Farrell** |

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for your application to DCU Research Ethics Committee (REC). Further to expedited review, DCU REC is pleased to issue approval for this research proposal.

DCU REC's consideration of all ethics applications is dependent upon the information supplied by the researcher. This information is expected to be truthful and accurate. Researchers are responsible for ensuring that their research is carried out in accordance with the information provided in their ethics application.

Materials used to recruit participants should note that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee. Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further amendment submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,

DCU
Research & Innovation

Taighde & Nuálaíocht Tacaíocht
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**Dr. Melrona Kirrane**
Chairperson
DCU Research Ethics Committee

*Note: Please retain this approval letter for future publication purposes (for research students, this includes incorporating the letter within their thesis appendices).*

## Appendix D: Interview Questions

1. What does the term school ethos mean to you?
   Do you think ethos impacts on the school day? (In what way?)
2. Could you talk to me about the ethos of this school?
   How does this impact on daily school life?
   Is the ethos discussed with new staff members, or discussed on a regular basis with current staff?
3. Is there a Religious Education policy in the school? (Who is responsible for maintaining and updating the policy?)
4. Are you aware of the Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland ? (Is it reflected in the Religious Education policy of the school?)
5. Tell me about Religious Education in your school?
   What are your thoughts on the Religious Education programme, The *Grow in Love* programme?
6. On a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being very important to 1 being not important at all, how important do you feel the teaching of Religious Education is to the lives of the pupils in your school? Talk to me about why you feel that.
7. When and how often is Religious Education taught in your school? How do you know if all the class teachers are teaching the full two and a half hours? Is Religious Education included as a section in the Cuntas Míosúil?
8. In your experience, how willing are teachers to teach Religious Education?
   e.g. are teachers supportive of religious services? Are they willing/able to prepare children for the sacraments? Are they willing/able to lead children and/or participate in religious services in the school e.g. Christmas celebration/end of year graduation mass? How willing are teachers to engage with Catholic Schools Week?
9. Is there a difference in the amount of time spent on Religious Education in second and sixth class, which are sacramental classes, and other classes? Why do you think this?
10. Tell me about the role that the diocese and parish plays? Are you aware of any policy on sacramental preparation from your diocese?

11. What is your opinion on how Religious Education is catered for in terms of continuing professional development? What would you like to see in the area of CPD and Religious Education.
12. Can you tell me about a time when Religious Education was an item for discussion on the agenda of the Board of Management. Describe what that was about.
13. Talk to me about how the school deals with a situation where a child or the parent of a pupil in the school, may not wish their child, to participate in Religious Education classes?

    Is there a whole school policy around how to proceed should such a situation arise?
14. The recently published Primary Curriculum Framework proposes a reduction in the time afforded to Religious Education. Is this something you agree with?

    What impact do you feel this reduction in time is likely to have on the teaching of Religious Education in the school?
15. The recently published Primary Curriculum Framework sees the replacing of the term Religious Education with the term Religion/Ethical/Multi-belief and Values Education. Is this something you agree with?

    What impact do you feel this change in terminology will have on the place of Religious Education in your school?
16. Is there anything you would like to add?