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## **Religion in Education: Exploring the Views and Experiences of Parents and Teachers towards Patronage in the Primary Education Sector in Ireland**

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### **Abstract**

This research examines the views and experiences of both parents and teachers with regards to the Patronage of the Primary Education sector in Ireland. Traditionally in Ireland, the Catholic Church has been the main educational provider in society. However, since the 1990s Irish society has become increasingly multicultural. This research explores the evolution and development of the primary education system in response to rapid social and demographic change. Qualitative methods were used to collect data from teachers and parents using open-ended questions in interviews. The research also conducted a critical analysis of the recent parental survey that was carried out by the Department of Education and Skills in early 2013. This article focuses on two themes that emerged from qualitative research with teachers and parents on patronage in the primary sector. The first is the concept of parental choice and the second refers to the outcomes of the parental survey. The issue around parental choice emerged frequently throughout the research; some arguing that parents do not have enough choice and others disagreeing. The critical analysis of the parental survey showed advantages and disadvantages of the survey and recommendations were made and further research suggested.

**Keywords:** Religion; Department of Education; primary education; multi-denominational schools; denominational schools

### **Introduction**

In Ireland over 96% of the primary schools have a religious ethos with 90% of these being Catholic run and fewer than 6% managed by the Church of Ireland. The long-standing tradition in Ireland is that the Catholic Church is seen as being the main educational provider in society. This ‘worked’ for many years until recent revelations and the publications of the Murphy and Ryan reports in 2009, after which the Catholic Church came under scrutiny and lost many supporters. With the emergence of immigration and different belief systems in Ireland and the weakening of the Catholic Church, the current primary sector offers very little choice to parents seeking an alternative education system. The Department of Education and Skills has recognised that maybe parents do not have full choice when deciding on a school for their child and has taken measures to change this. The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector (FPPPS) was set up in 2010 by former Minister Ruairí Quinn to investigate the history and changing circumstances of primary schools in Ireland. As part of the research, a parental survey was conducted by the Department of Education and Skills in 2012 and was rolled out to 43 towns across the country. This study investigates the opinions of parents who are involved in the issue of the patronage of the primary schools. It covers different time periods by interviewing (1) a parent whose children were enrolled in school in the 1990s, (2) parents who have children in the system now, and (3) a parent who is yet to send their children to school. I also interviewed teachers, who have a significant input into the delivery of programmes that relate to religion and inclusion. This research also addresses the shortcomings of the parental survey and provides a deeper insight into patronage and pluralism in the primary education sector in Ireland.

### **Literature and Policy Review**

#### *The History of the Church in Irish Primary Education: 1831-1922*

When Lord Stanley was appointed chief secretary of Ireland in 1830, he soon established the National Education System with a view that all children should be educated together; he did not see the benefit in segregating children from different religious backgrounds (Coolahan et. al, 2012). Thus, he declared that all schools

would be multi-denominational. The main churches of the time, namely Church of Ireland and Catholic, were opposed to the multi-denominational mode and began to establish their own schools (Lodge, et al, 2004). The opposition of the churches and also state financial issues forced denominational education onto the system and by the latter part of the century; Stanley's vision of multi-denominational education had been abandoned. Later, the Powis Commission 1870, an inquiry into the National Education System, recommended that the denominational system that had fallen into place should continue. Further segregation of children from different religions came when state funding was provided to set up religious teacher training colleges with each new institution established in accordance with the specific religious order that managed it (Coolahan, 2005).

#### *1922 – 1980s*

With Ireland becoming a Free State in 1922 and Northern Ireland remaining part of Britain, the education system, along with every other part of civil society was under scrutiny. One of the statements to come from the new state was by the newly appointed Minister for Education, Eoin MacNeill, in 1925:

Of all the parts of a school curriculum Religious Instruction is by far the most important... we assume, therefore, that Religious Instruction is a fundamental part of the school course... a religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school. The teacher – while careful, in the presence of children of different religious beliefs, not to touch on matters of controversy – should constantly inculcate, in connection with secular subjects, the practice of charity... and other moral virtues. (Cited in Hyland, 1989:92)

It was inevitable that, with no new change in the National Education system after Ireland gained independence, that the Catholic Church would become the predominant educators in Ireland. This was not such a problem or issue for the most part as the Catholic faith was the religion the majority favoured and a very small proportion of the population that were non-Catholic were educated in private or separate religious schools such as Church of Ireland and Presbyterian. It wasn't until the 1960s that the denominational status of the schools in Ireland was fully recognised. The new 1965 Rules for National Schools stated that 'primary education

for children in national schools [...] gives explicit recognition to the denominational character of these schools' (Coolahan et. al, 2012).

Parents began to fight for a say in the education of their children and parent-teacher meetings were introduced in the late 1960s with the approval of Vatican II (Coolahan et. al, 2012). The 1970s in Ireland saw even more change as parents and teachers became more involved in the running of the school when Boards of Management were set up. However, the election of new members was biased towards the ethos of the school, which gave no voice to the parents of children in the minority (Devine et al, 2004). Devine also suggests that the form of democracy used in the election of board members silenced the voices of the minority. Despite this, a multi-denominational school was open in the late 1970s in Dalkey, Co. Dublin on the basis that parents wanted such a school in the area for their children. Multi-denominational schools were not mentioned in any form of legislation or government papers until the Programme for Action in Education 1984 at which time a further two schools had been established under the patron of Educate Together (Curry, 2003). The document outlined the policy in relation to the new multi-denominational model of teaching:

Where the government is convinced that the establishment of a multi-denominational school represents the clear wishes of parents in an area and where such schools can be provided on a viable basis, support will be given to such developments on the same terms that would be available for the establishment of schools under denominational patronage. (Department of Education, 1984)

Curry (2003) explains that the Church provided the site and building for the schools in which they were patrons and likewise the new multi-denominational schools had to do the same for their new school.

### *1980s – Present*

The patronage of the primary schools in Ireland is a controversial topic (Cooney, 2011; Hyland, 1989; O'Toole, 2009) and has become even more significant in recent times in a context of increased immigration and religious diversity. The Catholic Church and Church of Ireland, which are the two dominant patrons, have spoken out about wanting to keep the ethos of their schools. The bishop's education council

argued that ‘provision must be made for the rights of Catholic parents and their children’, while then Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairí Quinn – mindful of diverse cultures in Irish Society – called for ‘the church to divest itself...from its control to accommodate the growing non-Catholic sector’ (cited in Cooney, 2011).

In the 1990s, many noteworthy changes were made to legislation in Education. The first was the Green Paper 1992, *Education for a Changing World* and the White Paper 1995, *Charting our Education Future*, which William (1997) argues were conflicting; the Green Paper 1992 was quite harsh in explaining changes that were expected whereas the follow up white paper seemed to be easier on patrons with regard the changes that they make. The Education Bill was first introduced in early 1997 and was heavily debated before being revised after a change in government (Curry, 1997). The churches (both Catholic and Church of Ireland) were opposed to the bill and became united against the bill’s aim to lessen the involvement of the school patron in the management of the school. One of the main findings of the new Education Act 1998 therefore was the statutory rule of every school having a Board of Management. This meant that that the churches still had power over the running of the school as a member of the clergy always acted as Chairperson on the Board of Management, although the Act consistently mentions the role of the parent throughout the document.

A significant development in the Education system was the announcement of Minister Ruairí Quinn in 2011 that a forum was to be established on the ‘Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector’. He invited all stakeholders involved in the Primary Sector to attend a three-day workshop, which included members of the public (Coolahan et al, 2012). They also consulted eighty one children from primary and junior post-primary schools on their experience of the Irish Education system. Minister Quinn, in his response to the Report of the Advisory Group on the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector, states that the report explores

how demand for different types of patronage can be met in certain areas of stable population by divesting (or transferring) patronage of certain existing schools where there is evidence of parental demand for same. (Quinn, 2012)

From this report many ideas have emerged and in October 2012 it was decided that a parental survey be carried out across five medium sized towns in Ireland to determine what type of Education they want for their children, followed by a further 38 areas to be surveyed in early 2013 (Department of Education and Skills, 2012). The results of these findings make for interesting reading and will be discussed in great detail later in this article.

*Diversity in Contemporary Irish Society*

Globalisation is one of the main factors as to why and how Ireland has become a multi-national society. Ireland became a hotspot for employment in the 1990s with a thriving economy and many EU citizens flocked to its shores to find work. According to the latest figures, the population in Ireland expanded by over one million people in twenty years (see Table 1). While the Catholic population increased along with this growth, the actual percentage of the population identifying as Catholic dropped by 7% (CSO, 2012). Another key outcome of the population increase is that while the Catholic percentage dropped, other religions and non-religions significantly increased. Although the population in Ireland has become more diverse, the National Education System has not kept pace with these changes.

**Table 1-** Population growth according to religion

<b>Census Year</b>	<b>Total number of Population 1991</b>	<b>Total number of Population 2011</b>	<b>Increase/ decrease in twenty years</b>
Population	3,525,719	4,588,252	+ 1,062,533
Catholic population	3,288,327 (91%)	3,861,335 (84%)	+ 573,008 (-7%)
Other Religion	147,747 (4.1%)	384,192 (8.4%)	236,445 (+4.3%)
Non Religion	66,270 (1.9%)	269,811 (5.9%)	203,541 (+4%)

(Source: C.S.O. 2012)

*Current types of Primary School in Ireland*

Today, in the Republic of Ireland 96% of the primary schools are under denominational patronage (Coolahan et. al, 2012). Over 90% of the schools have a Catholic ethos with the remaining 6.5% being schools with another religious ethos and 2.2% are multi-denominational (Department of Education, 2012). Most of the latter are found in urban areas while people in rural areas are left with little or no choice in the type of schooling that is available for their children.

A denominational school is a school that is under the patronage of one particular religion and religious education is taught in that school based on the beliefs and values of that particular religion (Coolahan et. al, 2012). According to Williams (1997) religious instruction is specifically designed to include religion in all aspects of the school day and can be used to help teach other subjects on a day-to-day basis. Due to the high number of Catholic schools in the country, often this is the only type of school available in a particular area, resulting in a high number of non-Catholic children attending Catholic schools. This is a similar situation within the Church of Ireland, as it is the second largest denomination in education. Both churches provide the buildings for the schools in each parish (Hyland, 1994).

‘Educate Together’ is the umbrella body under which the multi-denominational schools fall in the Republic of Ireland. There are 69 such schools in the country with over half of them being in Dublin ([www.schooldays.ie](http://www schooldays.ie), 2012). Multi-denominational schools aim to provide a more inclusive education with all religions and non-religions being celebrated and taught. The Educate Together school is its own patron as it is constituted as a company limited by guarantee and follows the existing rules of the Department of Education (Hyland, 1993). However, it is parents and teachers who found and also run the school under a Board Of Management. The parents and teachers also developed the core curriculum in religious education, which is a way of teaching all types of religion and the roles they play in society and in their own communities rather than the teaching of one particular belief system (Griffin, 1997).

The following table is the breakdown of the number of primary schools in Ireland by type for the school year 2009/2010.

*Table 2 – Numbers of different types of primary schools*

<b>Type</b>	<b>Number of schools</b>	<b>Percentage of schools</b>
Roman Catholic	2888	91%
Church of Ireland	181	5.7%
Presbyterian	14	0.4%
Methodist	1	0.03%
Jewish	1	0.03%
Inter-denominational	8	0.25%
Muslim	2	0.06%
Multi-Denominational	69	2.18%
Quaker	1	0.03%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>3165</b>	

(Source: The Irish Times, 2010)

### **Methodology**

Qualitative research methods were used to undertake this research as it explores the social world through the eyes of its participants (Bryman, 2012). It interprets how they see and experience the world around them and how interaction with certain aspects of the world impacts on their lives, it aims to understand people (Sarantakos, 1994). In this study I conducted personal interviews using open-ended questions to discover the experiences of people involved in the Irish education system on the role of patronage in primary schools. Firstly, I chose to interview parents who are involved in the school system on a daily basis in order to get an insight into their opinions and experiences of the role of the patrons in the schools. Secondly, I chose to interview three teachers who are close to the issue of the patronage of the schools in Ireland and are involved in the everyday running of the schools. Each teacher is from a different type of school, namely: Catholic; Church of Ireland; and, Educate Together schools. As each teacher is from a school with a different approach to the ethos and patronage, this enhances the data-creation process from a professional point of view, since teachers are at the coalface of the Irish primary education system. As part of the



primary research of this study, the recent parental survey carried out by the Department of Education was critiqued and analysed.

## **Finding and Analysis**

### *Parental Choice*

#### *a. Teachers*

Teacher one feels that parents have a choice when it comes to religious instruction in the class and that they can opt out if they feel they want to. She says that her school will fight to keep their patronage as it is rare and it does offer further choice to parents in the area when choosing schools ‘we usually have about ninety children’s names down each year for twenty-five to thirty places.’

Teacher two finds that parents do have a choice when choosing whether their child takes part in religious education but has experienced that they do not always have the personnel to supervise the children who are not par-taking and when speaking of the parents; ‘we accommodate them as much as possible but they are in a Catholic school so they have to be flexible as well and understand’. She referred throughout the interview to two children in her class while she was teaching sixth class who were not making their confirmation and said that the school had accommodated their needs and choices as much as possible.

Teacher three felt that parents who sent their children to the school where she teaches only did so because of the multi-denominational ethos. She did say however, that some Irish parents only send their child to the school while waiting on a place in the nearby Catholic school. She said the reason for this mostly is that parents want siblings to attend the same school and since her school only caters for infants at the moment none of the older children can avail of the multi-denominational experience.

#### *b. Parents*

When asked about the choice they felt they had in choosing a school, parents showed a mixed response. Parent one felt that he did not particularly have choice with the schools in his area stating, ‘there was awareness that even if we had wanted a school of different religious background we were unlikely to qualify as eligible applicants as availability was based on membership of a particular church.’ He did however choose

the school that he did as it was close to their home and he wanted his children to have friends in the area. Within the school he then had the choice to have his children take the sacraments or not and there was no problem around this.

Parent two chose the school where her children went similarly to parent one as the school was close to their home and she wanted her children to have friends in the area. The school had a good reputation and is in a nice area which swayed her decision. When it came to religious instruction however, she felt that 'I wasn't really given a choice but rather than disrupt the class and make a big deal out of it I let them do it', although she said that her children will not be partaking in the sacraments.

Parent three is yet to send her children to school as they are only pre-school age. They will begin school in 2015 and she feels that there is little choice in her area within a relevant distance. She would prefer the Gaelscoil but will opt for the Catholic school as her Irish is not strong enough; these are the only two schools she identified in her area.

Parent four was not aware of or did not look into any other schools in her area and was happy for her child to attend the Catholic school close by. She would like to continue to send her child to a Catholic school.

Again, the parents seem to have a mixed view as to the choice of schools that is available to them. Parent one felt that there was no choice at the time of his choosing in the 1990s as his children were not eligible to attend the other schools in the area, namely the private, Gaelscoil or other denominational schools. Parent two feels that she was given no choice as did parent four; however both parents are happy with the school in which their children attend. Parent three is happy to send her children to the local Catholic school as they will be brought up as Catholics anyway but would not rule out a multi-denominational school either.

*Parental Survey carried out by Department of Education and Skills.*

*a. Document Analysis*

The parental survey, which was conducted under the Department of Education and Skills, was a short online survey that offered parents of pre-school children and

primary school children the opportunity to express their views on the patronage of the schools. One of the strengths of this survey was that it involved parents in the decision making process. This was the first survey of its kind in Ireland in which it asked the parents of children in primary school and pre-school age what type of schooling they felt should be available to their children. Another advantage of the survey was that it gave the Department of Education and Skills an idea of the level of demand for the divestment of the patronage of the primary sector. One of the disadvantages of the survey was that it was only open for a short period of time which can cause less people to respond. As the first five towns that were surveyed on a pilot basis were medium sized towns the amount of parents the survey was open to was quite large. Taking into account the time period, there was a gateway of three weeks to complete the survey and the amount of people the survey was available to, the response rate ended up being quite low, ranging from 23% to 43% (Department of Education and Skills, 2012).

**Table 3** - Response rate of parental survey

<b>Area</b>	<b>Responses %</b>
Arklow	23.5%
Castlebar	43.1%
Tramore	26.0%
Trim	43.1%
Whitehall	23.5%

Another disadvantage of the parental survey was the small amount of questions that were asked. Approximately eight of the eighteen questions asked were relevant to the study with the other remaining eight being for logistical purposes. Therefore I would contend that the results that were extrapolated from the survey are a poor reflection of the specific views of parents. The survey asked some personal information of the parents including their full name, address and PPS number which will have a major impact on the amount of responses received as it takes away the anonymity that surveys usually offer to participants. During the pilot phase of the survey (October - November 2012), the Department of Education and Skills failed to advertise the

online survey effectively. They did however advertise somewhat more extensively for the second round of the surveys with the production of leaflets, radio adverts and a telephone helpline. However, the explanation of the different types of patronage that exist in Ireland was not provided to parents. The Catholic Schools Partnership did however send leaflets to houses explaining what Catholic schools are and how they work which is an effective way of informing the public of what they do although it is obviously biased to the ethos of one type of school. The Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) released a statement in 2012 outlining their disappointment in the survey only being available to parents ‘the consultation process must include the teaching staff’ (Donnelly, 13<sup>th</sup> Dec 2012).

*b. Teachers*

Although the survey was aimed at parents only, the teachers that I interviewed were unhappy that they did not have their voices heard. The first teacher who teaches in a Church of Ireland school feels that the Department of Education and skills ‘have missed a huge opportunity to get the views of teachers’ and are ‘not taking what we (the teachers) are thinking into consideration’. She also expresses the opinion of other teachers who work in the same school ‘I know that there are a lot of teachers including myself who are a bit annoyed that we haven’t been included.’ Teacher two, who teaches in a Catholic school, also expressed that she felt that the Department needed to seek the opinions of teachers; ‘I don’t see how the department will make any decisions without consulting the people who teach religion which is the teachers.’ Teacher three who is a teacher in an Educate Together school believes that teachers should have been included in a ‘different survey’ as they are coming from a ‘different standpoint’. It is evident from the interviews carried out with teachers that they feel that they have been excluded from the recent survey regarding patronage in schools.

*c. Parents*

When it comes to the parents that I interviewed, two out of the four were eligible to partake in the parental survey based on their hometown and age of their children. However, neither of the parents had heard of the survey with parent four commenting ‘No, I didn’t know about that and didn’t take part either.’ The parent who has children in Leixlip, enquired about how to take part, as the survey was due to take place in her area shortly after this interview was conducted ‘I will definitely take part in that now

that I know about it because I think parents should definitely have a choice in schools for their children.’ It is clear from the above that the Department of Education and Skills advertising campaign on the parental survey has failed to reach many of the parents in the areas surveyed.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, the primary sector of the Irish Education system has different types of schools, which offer different types of religious education. The majority of these schools have a religious ethos and there are very few alternatives offered to both children and their parents when it comes to deciding on a school, which can cause exclusion within the school. The findings of the parental survey are the basis in which the government will decide upon where to divest patronage of certain schools. This study has exposed the weaknesses in the parental survey and it is the recommendation of the researcher that further surveys be conducted primarily with teachers.

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Please note the change of the name of the Department is as follows;

Department of Education (1922-1996)

Department of Education and Science (1997-2010)

Department of Education and Skills (2010-present)