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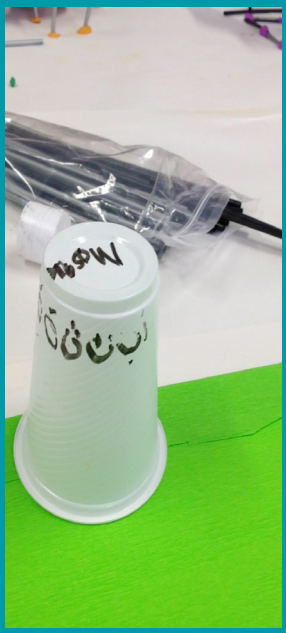
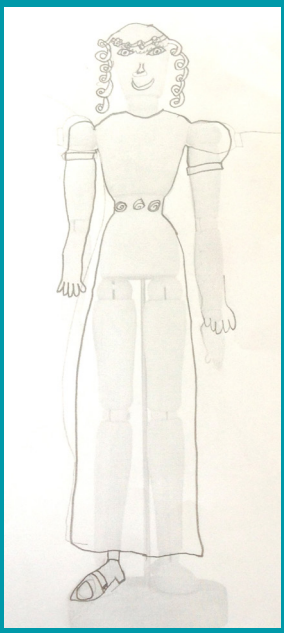
Children's Beliefs and Belonging

A Schools and Families Report from the 'Making Communion' study





Karl Kitching and Yafa Shanneik

The images and objects shown on the front of this report were constructed, taken by, or created by children participating in the project themselves. The first is a representation of a mosque that one of the children attends, which he placed on a map of his local area. The second is a drawing of a child anticipating her Communion day and how she might be dressed. The third is a photo one of the children took of her garden, a favourite play area.

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June 2015

Acknowledgements

We wish to sincerely thank the four school communities who so warmly welcomed us, and engaged with this research study during a very busy school year. Principals, teachers, SNAs, administrative staff and parents gave of their time, during and after school, to facilitate access to classrooms, focus groups, and of course, their own professional and personal knowledge. The space and time that people made for us in their schools and homes was invaluable.

We particularly wish to thank the children who participated in this study. We learned a great deal from them about what it is like to grow up in different places in Ireland. This report focuses almost entirely on their views and experiences and we hope it reflects the richness of their personal views and engagements with the world.

Sincere thanks also to the religious leaders, community representatives, young people and senior citizens who gave us a broader sense of what their locality means to them.

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Introducing this report

This report provides an overview of a research study of childhood and social change in the Republic of Ireland. The study is called 'Making Communion: Disappearing and Emerging Forms of Childhood in Ireland'. Most of the fieldwork was carried out over six weeks in early 2013. The study focused on four school communities in Ireland of varying sizes and histories of formation. A major part of the study involved examining children's beliefs, values and the forms of belonging available to them in both religious and non-religious terms. This report explores this part of the study.

The research focused on the broad theme of Roman Catholic First Holy Communion, for a number of reasons. 'Communion' has been a strong symbol of traditional childhood in Ireland (Lodge 1999). Changes in how Communion is celebrated indicate changes in wider Irish society and how childhoods are experienced. Changes such as the influence of mass media, digital technologies, the growth of child-level consumption and the significance of popular culture to children are particularly important to consider. Communion is also connected to issues of children's inclusion and exclusion, as indicated by ongoing debates about the majority Catholic ownership and management of primary schools in Ireland (Devine 2011; Coolahan et al. 2012). While by no means 'the core issue' facing schools and families in the contemporary Ireland, Communion is connected to many strands of public debate regarding schooling, State and Religion, and children's belonging.

The report is divided into three main sections. First, we offer a very brief overview of some of the key issues regarding religions, values and social change in Ireland and Europe. We also note how 'the right kind of childhood' has increased in importance as a kind of moral benchmark of Ireland's 'development' and reputation internationally. The report then explains the methods used to conduct the study. Our findings regarding children, beliefs, values and belongings are then explored in seven key areas. Rather than offer recommendations about what 'good' childhoods or school days should entail, we hope that these findings provide further insight into how children define such ideas and differ on them.

Values, belongings and social change in Ireland & Europe

In this section, we outline a few key trends regarding children, families and their civic and social participation in the Irish and European context. While our main focus is on religion, we look at broader values, practices and institutional norms regarding consumerism and the media, education, and social inclusion and exclusion.

Those studying social and religious change often debate the issue of 'secularisation' (Gearon 2012). Secularisation typically refers to the idea that Religion as an institution and set of practices has declined as a defining feature of a given society. It also suggests the influence of religious authority over societal institutions has waned or been made effectively separate. Secularisation is associated with processes of industrialisation, urbanisation, and the displacing of theological accounts of the world with scientific and rationalist explanations. However, a secular society is not one where Religion is absent; rather, it is usually defined as one where religious heritage, cultures and practices are recognised and valued features of civil society governed by institutions of the nation-state (Byrne 2013). But secularisation is not a linear or totalising process. Rather, the significance of religious institutions and symbols stop and start, persist, change and diversify within contemporarily complex societies.

Contemporary Ireland is characterised by increased and rapid flows of money, people, ideas, images and technologies. A few key trends are worth noting. The number of people identifying with no religion, including atheists and agnostics, increased fourfold between 1991 and 2011 (CSO 2012). This figure stands at over a quarter of a million people, 15,000 of whom are primary school age children. However, the proportion of the population identifying as Roman Catholic in 2011 remains high, at 3.8 million (84%), with Polish Catholics numbering 110,000. The increased presence of migrant and diasporic communities (and to a smaller extent, conversion) reflect how the belief profile of Ireland's population has diversified further over the past twenty years. For example, 45,000 people are identified in the broad 'Orthodox' category, while a similar population now identify as Muslim, including over 8,000 children of primary school age.

Alongside the well-documented decrease in the moral authority of the Catholic Church in Irish society (Inglis 1998), it is clear that the practices and beliefs of the now more ethnically diverse Roman Catholic population have changed. Catholics in Ireland are a good example of the need to distinguish between one's 'beliefs' and one's 'belonging' to a particular religious institution (Davie 1994). The 2010 European Social Survey shows that 21.7% of Catholics placed themselves at the midpoint of a scale where 0 is 'not at all religious' and 10 is 'very religious'. 30.4% identified below this midpoint, while 47.9% placed themselves above it (O'Mahony 2012). As O'Mahony (2012) points out however, generational differences are important: Catholics aged over 55 are far more likely to identify as 'very religious' (7-10 on the scale) compared to those under 35. 41% of Catholics attend Mass on a weekly only basis, 17% attend at least once a month, 13% only on special holy days, and 17% less often than this. 40% pray every day, 15% more than once a week, and 8% at least once a month.

An all-island study commissioned by the Association of Catholic Priests suggests one in five Catholics only attend Mass for celebratory and/or religious occasions (Amárach 2012). The same study noted that 3 out of 4 Catholics disagreed with Church teachings on sexuality, with 3 in 5 believing there is 'nothing wrong' with homosexuality. 5% agreed with the practice of not giving communion to divorcees and those separated and in a second relationship. Almost 50% felt that the voice of laypeople was not being heard in relation to issues of priesthood, worship and morality.

The changing nature of childhood and education in globalised societies

As western societies have de-traditionalised, moral norms have increasingly focused on the 'quality' of childhoods, and on children's social participation. While there are many positives to this trend in terms of a focus on children's wellbeing, rights and voices, contemporary public morality around childhood itself reflects the complexity and shape of secularisation processes. Investment of time and money in a 'good' childhood is linked in part with the move towards increasingly competitive societies. Children's value in educational and other settings is increasingly 'derived from the capacity to produce, excel, self-regulate as well as consume' (Devine 2013: 282). Expectations for children's cognitive, social and moral development have increased significantly, raising further

questions around whether all families have equal access to the resources necessary to reach such ideals, and, in the context of rising child poverty, whether such ideals are in fact always desirable or straightforward. This backdrop is important to understanding the complexity of being a child and raising children today. But it is important to say that certain 'current concerns' are not as new as they may seem. For example, despite concerns about the increasing commercialisation of childhood, industrialised societies have long catered towards a child 'market' (Buckingham 2011).

Parent/guardian-child relationships are important to religious continuity, even if in the case of many Irish Catholics, that means continuing a shared sense of cultural tradition rather than overt commitment to religious practices. Irish data from the cross-European Religious Education in Multicultural Contexts (REMC) study suggested infrequent attendance by parents at religious services, and a greater likelihood of attending major celebrations and festivals (Smyth et al. 2013). However, the younger the child, the more likely (religion/tradition-oriented) parents were to expect higher levels of conformity to the religion, 'to provide them with a religious grounding from which they could develop their own religious outlook in later life' (REMC 2008: 39). Smith (2005) makes clear that in fact, children within and across different backgrounds place different emphases on institutional affiliation, belonging, beliefs, behaviours, practices and religious and spiritual experiences in different times and places. Indeed, the REMC study stated the 7–12 year olds interviewed 'indicated complex engagement with religious beliefs and practices … which could not be easily reduced to formal religious categories. Children's religious identity also emerged as fluid' (REMC 2008: 40). Children can hold different religious views from their parents, or even when similar to parents, a more personalised set of meanings could be evoked. In this sense, children's commercialised, traditional and religious forms of participation are complex and dynamic, and cannot be reduced to being a matter of adult imposition or of individual child choice.

The focus of religious education (i.e., choosing to teach *within, from* or *about religions*) is an area of significant debate in wider Europe. A state policy focus on citizenship, democracy and rights has increasingly dominated discussions on religious education (RE). Gearon (2012) argues that social cohesion, belonging security, tolerance and prejudice reduction have become major concerns for RE, rather than discussions

of religious and theological exploration as ends in themselves. This was the broader concern of a recent RedCo-Project survey of young people in eight European countries. The survey stated young people welcomed a vision of Europe as religiously plural and not exclusionary on the basis of religious truth-claims. At the same time, prejudices were mainly directed against Islam (Bertram-Troost et al. 2008). In Ireland, sectarian (Catholic and Protestant) conflict in Northern Ireland has been arguably, interchangeably ethnic in nature (McVeigh 2000). Despite the diversification of religious and non-religious childhoods in Ireland, the assumption that to be 'truly Irish' is to be 'Catholic' has been found as a feature of child-level interactions structured through schools (Devine 2011). It is interesting then, that the development of intercultural education policy in Ireland has not been explicitly linked with the question of (religious) school patronage (Kitching 2014). Certainly, teaching about ethics and other religions is possible in denominational schools, but the growing Educate Together movement has focused most on studying religions and ethics as part of its *Learn Together* curriculum.

Questions of freedom and expression and the role that religions can, or do play in mutual understanding in southern schools has only recently become a formal state level concern, via the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism (Coolahan et al. 2012). Of course, certain Catholic leaders have been concerned for some years with questions of school patronage, divestment and diversity in Irish society (Martin 2011). But various agencies and commentators at international and national level have also been vocal about the infringement of the rights of non-religious and non-Catholic children and families, amidst majority Catholic school provision and the total absence of non-denominational schools (IHRC 2011; Coolahan et al. 2012). These concerns relate not only to the virtual impossibility of 'opting out' of class when religion is integrated across the curriculum in denominational schools (Mawhinney 2007), but also to the lesser enrolment chances of non-Catholic and non-baptised children in oversubscribed schools. Returning to the question of 'good' childhoods, family social class, local belonging and levels of knowledge about 'reputable' schools are also tangled up with the expression of 'preferred' school in Ireland and internationally (Byrne et al. 2010; Darmody et al. 2012).

But as indicated at the outset, our goal is not to 'resolve' issues around school patronage or what counts as a 'good' childhood, but to add further to current understandings of children's lives and experiences in Ireland. In other words, we must recognise that, depending on their circumstances, children themselves interpret what a 'good' childhood is and how it should be lived in diverse ways. The next section briefly explains how the study was conducted.

The research approach

This project began in the 2010-2011 school year with a 'pilot' or 'trial' research study. Karl began exploring the issues over a course of visits to one city-based Catholic primary school. This provided the chance to find ways to explore fairly abstract questions of beliefs, values and ethics with children, and to situate them within children's wider worlds, circumstances and interests (including visits to church and meeting parents). The methods used involved a mix of whole class activities and interviews with 2-4 children in friendship groups. Activities included creating imaginary (fictive) characters with the children that were the same age as them (i.e., in second class, 7-8 years of age). The creation of these characters gave us the opportunity to discuss questions of belief and non-belief, inclusion and exclusion using hypothetical situations with children, rather than relying on children's direct experiences necessarily. However, children moved back and forth between real-world experiences and imaginary characters to indicate their views. While parents gave their consent for the vast majority of children to participate in the research activities, children used smiley/unsure/sad faces every day to indicate whether they wished to take part in specific activities.

Funding from the Irish Research Council in 2012 provided the opportunity to expand the study into a more wide-ranging exploration of how childhood is experienced at 7-8 over two weeks in differing case study settings, using the themes of 'Communion', belonging, inclusions and exclusions. We identified 3 further schools to take part in the larger study, based in rural, large town and suburban areas in different parts of Ireland. Since the focus of this report is on children 'rather than' school approaches per se, we do not go into detail about specific school characteristics. But of course, place and local dynamics (e.g. population, history) are central to understanding the children's experiences. In all, two of the four schools had DEIS status (Bands 1 and 2 respectively). Three of the schools were Catholic, while one was an Educate Together school. Three of the four schools were co-educational, and one was an all-boys' school. One school had a significant number of students of migrant background. It was difficult to access schools with a significant group of Traveller children and adults; for this reason, we accessed six Traveller participants (two children, two young women and two older members of the community) through a city-based community development organisation (geographically apart from all other case studies).

Altogether, approximately 100 children participated in classroom based and/or in-depth focus groups. While this is not a small number, we wish to stress that our study is focused on *deeply understanding* specific, complex childhood experiences rather than categorising and quantifying those experiences statistically. All children quoted in the report are given pseudonyms.

The larger study also provided the opportunity to further interview local parents' about issues of school ethos, school 'choice' processes, and child rearing. It allowed us to explore adult (parent, teacher), youth (in local secondary schools) and senior citizens' accounts of their own childhoods and /or Communions 'in this place' or another. This included interviewing religious representatives such as nuns and priests about their own childhoods, and their views on childhood in Ireland today. Most importantly for the purposes of this report, the larger study allowed us to expand the activities we did with children; from using short videos, local photographs and other images to explore various themes and understandings, to creating maps of their locality and favourite places, to creating diagrams and drawings of significant events and objects in their lives. We witnessed First Holy Communion celebrations in all four localities, including with a Catholic after-school group facilitated by Educate Together.

Key findings

Key finding 1: Children had their own personal knowledge of home, school, ethical and religious connections

Given the significance of age and progression through institutions to establishing one's authority in many societal domains, we found most of these 7-8 year-old children implicitly trusted and invested in the guidance and experience of adults regarding a range of aspects of their lives. This included moral principles, formal religious knowledge, traditional obligations and sacred practices learned at home and in school. For these children, this trust could be repaid in terms of achieving, at the appropriate age, formal recognition by their family or community, e.g. via First Holy Communion. However, while children are still developing their formal moral and religious knowledge, and such domains were often considered by both children and adults to be naturally adult-centred, children still showed considerable capacity to personally interpret the culture of home, school and Religion and the connections and disconnections between various symbols, figures and settings. Below, Maria describes 'what is going on' in her drawing of the local church:

Maria: Father James is talking out to the kids
...
Yafa: So, what do you think he will talk about?
Maria: How do you spell Jesus? He is talking about Jesus
Yafa: What's that?
Maria: A light
Yafa: And um, is there a lot of light in the church
Maria: Yeah, sometimes just to make, just looking down because sometimes it's a bit dark inside there
Yafa: Mm. What is this one here sorry,
Maria: It's a little press where the bread is in
Yafa: Would you like to get the bread as well?
Maria: Only Mom gets it sometimes, well we don't get it yet, we are not really big enough.

While relatively invisible and informal, children were actively involved in developing their own understandings of these symbols, figures and settings, and the relationships between them. When discussing her favourite people and places, the following Catholic children stated:

Aoibheann: Father James is funny, because when we have our hands up (in class) he thinks we are waving.
Yafa: And what else?
Rosie: When we kind of go like this (gestures) he copies us.
Yafa: (laughs) he copies you, ok.
Rosie: He's a funny priest
Karl: Is he funny in Mass?
Rosie: No
Karl: No? Why not?
Rosie: I don't know.

Various children observed continuities and discontinuities between home, school and Religion, and commented on differences in freedom and authority that age confers on adults over children. These somewhat more challenging observations were unremarkable amongst children themselves, but seemed relatively invisible to adults.

Yafa: So you usually pray before a meal?
Colin: Yeah - no, I don't anyway
Lucy: In school we do
Yafa: So in school you pray before you eat. And at home?
Colin and Lucy: Em, no.
Yafa: Why is that?
Colin: Don't have a clue
Karl: So the first time you prayed was in school was it?
Colin: Yeah
Karl: And did you ever decide to tell your Mam and Dad that you should pray before meals?
Colin: Nnno.
Lucy: Well I did say if (sic) I showed them the prayer before meals
Karl: Yeah, and what did they say?
Lucy: (Misinterpreting the question, sings) Bless us oh God as we eat together, bless the food we eat today, bless the hands that made the food, bless us oh God amen?

Karl: And what did they say?
Lucy: I forget

As Colin and Lucy's words above indicate, some children did not question where discontinuities arose. While this non-questioning could reflect trust in the process of growing up within a certain tradition, at other times, it reflected disengagement from that process, or lack of personal choice in it.

Many children expressed a variety of connections to, and knowledge of religious practices, but, given what some saw as an excessive level of formality, children often did not indicate they were enabled to explore religious themes and ethical questions with adults in various settings. Some acknowledged that solemnity was a key part of religious spaces, and that they could not simply do what they wanted because as Eva put it, 'other people are praying'. However, a number of children in fact observed ways that children could participate more fully, even when they had no religious affiliation. For example, possible alterations that could be made to the church to make it more child-friendly were discussed. These included seats where children could see what was happening, or, as with Maria earlier, increasing the light in the church. During a whole-class activity, Dean, a non-religious boy attending a Catholic school, stated:

Dean: Em there's nothing fun about (the church) its just always holy.
Karl: Can you be holy and have fun at the same time?
Others: Yeah, yeah yeah
Karl: Ok so you can do that, how could you have fun and still be holy?
Mairead: You could sing being holy like 'praise God' (humming, raising her arms and moving her body in the seat)
Karl: Can you dance and be holy?
Children: Yes (some laugh).

Overall, it appeared that informal settings, experiences and learning opportunities offered children greater capacity to show their knowledge and expertise, and to be visible on their own terms. However, such informality tended to be restricted to leisure and play (TV, gaming, sports), consumption (food, music, fashion) and personal, private prayer. Arguably this reinforces a situation where children are regarded visible in non-religious domains, and as 'passive' or unknowing in relation to

the more formal cultures in which ethical and religious principles are circulated. Key findings 2 and 3 contribute to making young children's knowledge, beliefs and practices in the domains of ethics and religion more visible.

Key finding 2: Religious beliefs and sense of belonging to Religion were multi-faceted and place-specific

Echoing the words above, it is useful to distinguish between what the children used to create their own sense of identity and how they made sense of the (more formal, adult) world. Many drew on popular culture and a variety of non-sacred artefacts to express their individual identities, tastes and affiliations. Religious themes, objects, symbols and figures were more likely to be considered when discussing their sense of community, or intermittently, to help offer explanations of human existence.

Aoife: (I have a puppy called Bertie, my favourite famous person is Jedward, my favourite book is the Spanish Dictionary, my best friends are Zoe and Ciara. My favourite animal is badger.)

Mary: (My best friends are Gráinne, Aoife and Holly I don't know her last name. My favourite animal is a dog. I love my teacher because she's funny and I love the priest because he's funny and holy.)

Robert: (I believe in God. Yeah, I believe Jesus is his son. You know why? Because they all say Jesus loves the people so much that he actually became God's child, so I really believe him)

Karl: (So you have a religion?)

Robert: (I know how to say that in Romanian... *Creștin-Ortodox*. Christian Orthodox.)

Unsurprisingly, in relation to formal Religion, children were more likely to describe 'what you do' as opposed to 'why you do it'. The extent to which children referenced, or were interested in somewhat more abstract religious themes (the 'why' of Religion) varied. Previous in-depth research elsewhere has highlighted that, both across and within religious groupings, children do not experience Religion as a one-dimensional thing (Smith 2005; Hemming and Madge 2011). Similarly, children in our study expressed religious beliefs and belonging in subtle, contextually different and 'fluid' (Smyth et al. 2013) ways. Place-based relationships and histories were an important factor in how identification with religious figures and places was expressed. Various children placed churches and

mosques on maps of their worlds and, as with Rosie and Aoibheann in Key Finding 1, some felt close to their religious leader, i.e. the local priest, because he was 'holy' and 'funny'. In one rural Catholic school, some children felt the school and church should be located close to each other because the church is 'holy', 'it's God's house' and 'it keeps the children safe in the school'. Although most participating children in this school did not appear to observe the Catholic faith outside of Communion year, themes of holiness, specialness, protection and thanksgiving were present in their justifications of belief, and feelings of belonging to the community. The concept of 'holiness' could be used in exclusionary ways however, as discussed in Key Finding 5.

Many of these younger children did not actively, consciously or consistently use formal categories to identify religiously (especially when positioned as an extension of their family in such matters). Similar to Smith (2005), many did not indicate an awareness of how their school's ethos differed from others. But certainly, children in our study could and did self-identify as non-religious, Catholic, Muslim or unsure, for example. Returning to the importance of place, school ethos and levels of ethnic and religious diversity in the school shaped how and when children used a particular term to identify themselves. In fact, the children appeared more likely to use (non-) affiliations when religious difference was openly acknowledged (or contested) as a feature of the differing public spheres they participated in (school, neighbourhood, etc.). The leadership of one Catholic school placed a strong emphasis on events such as Catholic Schools Week, which is designed to 'promote' a specific Catholic sense of identity. In this school, Sam demonstrates that it is difficult to provide a total explanation of what 'Catholic' means, but he can give contextualised examples:

Karl:	What happened today at half eleven? You went downstairs for something
Sam:	Eh, to get ashes on our head?
Karl:	Why do you do that?
Sam:	Cause em, like its part of the Catholic, an all
Karl:	The Catholic – what?
Sam:	Like, you give up something for Lent and all?

In another Catholic school, children were less conscious of the term 'Catholic', but this was because their locality was more deeply embedded in assumptions about local tradition. The school was in a small rural area with little ethnic or religious diversity; also the school and the local clergy had a close, informal working relationship. Children repeatedly referred to their sense of 'us' as a small community, which was implicitly Catholic. For some boys in an Educate Together setting, identifying as Muslim was an important part of their collective recognition as distinct from their peers within their class. In contrast to the small rural school, their affiliation as Muslim referred not just to local community, but in quite a global sense, perhaps given their diverse national backgrounds and awareness of international pilgrimage sites, amongst other factors.

The significance of categories of religious identity to children can be more deeply understood by exploring their concrete experiences of individual and collective religious practices. The majority of Catholic children in the study reported going to Mass infrequently, and reports of routine family prayers was uncommon. There was relative affection for the Church in many cases, without a strong sense of religious identification. However, many children of Catholic background implicitly held theist views, for example. This was strongly articulated when referencing religious stories, such as the Annunciation in a Catholic school:

Karl : Do you think that could happen today, that someone could have a baby made by God?
Mairead: Well, every baby is made by God
Alan: So you could just say everybody's made by God cause we were all babies

While not a frequent feature of our conversations, a number of children did mention personal, sensory experiences that were valuable to them, and that could be defined as 'religious' or 'spiritual'. Below, Bobby, a Catholic boy, discusses the impact that a certain period of prayer had for him, reflecting a 'thanksgiving' focus that was common amongst a number of children:

Bobby: Sometimes you're doing that for your soul, sometimes I do that and it helps your soul somehow. Once I actually felt it happening, it was sort of a tingling

Karl: In your middle? Did it make you feel good?
Bobby: Yeah
...
Karl: And how do you know it was something to do with God?
Bobby: Cause I've been doing it a lot
Karl: Praying?
Bobby: Yeah
Karl: And do you pray on your own or do you pray with other people?
Bobby: I pray on my own... I say thank you God for helping me and stuff like that

Notwithstanding this sense of 'cultural Catholicism' among many children, the following discussion with Caoimhe emphasises that children, like adults, can feel more positively disposed to certain aspects of religious practice (e.g. private prayer) than others (e.g. public sacraments). The difference for children is that they often have less chance of their individual concerns being taken on board and usually must adapt accordingly.

Caoimhe: Sometimes, maybe in the morning in my bedroom or at night... I'd say keep me safe through the day and night and try to forgive me for my sins?
Karl: And do you feel that, do you believe all that?
Caoimhe: I don't know whether to or whether or not to believe it so sometimes I get confused why I'm doing it or if I should be because maybe he mightn't exist
Karl: Who's he?
Caoimhe: God... sometimes I feel like God, Jesus and Mary mightn't exist... that's why I sometimes get confused about all that
Karl: And how do you feel about Communion then?
Caoimhe: Umm, well I'll probably just feel alright, doing it. I feel a little bit scared though, because all the people and saying prayers and stuff in front of lots of people I don't know
Karl: And have you ever told people you feel a bit scared?
Caoimhe: Em, no
Karl: Why not?
Caoimhe: Because like, then most of the time when I tell people I'm scared they takes ages trying to talk me out of it.

In another parish, the *Do This in Memory of Me* programme was interpreted in a very specific way by the priest, who built positive relationships with local children (and a number of them commented on how much they liked him). The priest regularly came in and out of the school and jovially nominated communicants to read at weekend Mass. A number of children looked forward to this public rehearsal of the liturgy, even if it was daunting and involved minimal decision-making on their part. Children in general were very mindful of the 'performance' aspect of these public ceremonies as they tended to be carefully choreographed and rehearsed.

Ethnicity is a thread that runs throughout our findings in terms of children's experience of religion. Two Traveller brothers articulated a different experience of Catholicism and its significance, particularly in relation to the importance of holy statues and icons. Here, a Traveller community development worker 'Deirdre' worked with us in discussing religion with the boys. They used distinctive terms like 'Our Lord' and 'Our Lady', which were not used in a routine way with any other (Catholic) children; their references to 'us' were also implicitly a reference to Traveller families and community.

Deirdre:	Is Religion important in your house?
Both:	Yes
Deirdre:	And Our Lady?
Both:	Yes
Deirdre:	And who's it important to?
Shane:	All of us. Michael (older brother) has a statue of our Lady and I have another one
Michael:	You have Our Lady of Fatima and I have Our Lady with d'you know them, what you call them white birds again… doves
Shane:	Michael has a statue of Our Lord. It's like an ornament
Deirdre:	Who bought it?
Shane:	I dunno, I'd say I was only small when people gave me them
Deirdre:	And tell me do you got to Mass on Sunday?
Shane:	Sometimes, the odd time
Karl:	What about your Granny?
Michael:	Em, every Sunday… she has a room filled with holy stuff. She even has a big, d'you know the boards with a picture on it, of St Bernadette

Regardless of strength of identification, frequency of religious observance, ethnic or national background, children actively drew together different traditions with more contemporary narratives to make sense of the world beyond home and school. They fused religious, mythical, quasi-historical, scientific, civil administrative and popular cultural images and stories to explain the world and help continue their process of identity formation (Gregory et al. 2012). For example: Majid and Ismail discuss who, beyond their parents, decides when a deed is right or wrong. Despite the context suggesting Majid learned about certain Islamic imagery from tradition, Ismail does not connect this imagery to a traditional source:

Karl:	Majid, who would make the rules about right and wrong?
Majid:	Mm, the judge?
Karl:	Is there anyone else? Who tells you what's right and wrong?
Majid:	My Daddy and my Mommy.
Karl:	And does God have anything to do with it?
Majid:	Em, yes
Karl:	Would you say God, or Allah?
Majid:	Allah…well mostly Allah does, and the angels see if it's right or wrong, they're on your shoulder, and they write down what's bad or good
…	
Yafa:	So, Majid, when I steal something, who tells me its wrong?
…	
Ismail:	A devil?
Karl:	Does he (devil) do good things or bad things?
Ismail:	Bad
Yafa:	And would the devil tell me to steal? (yes) And who tells me not to steal?
Ismail:	Angel?
Yafa:	And where are the angels?
Ismail:	Eh, here (points to his shoulder)
…	
Karl:	Where did you see that?
Ismail:	Em, Spongebob?

To varying degrees, children could also make superstitious interpretations of their religion; some Catholic children in different contexts conjectured that God or Jesus might give them 'bad luck' if they did something wrong. But participants did not fuse these images and narratives uncritically. Some raised questions with us about narratives of human development that they felt might be conflicting or confusing. This did not mean they rejected such narratives; rather they wished to make sense of them in the context of their wider learning, and in the context of the space our interviews opened up.

Mairead:	One thing I don't get? Do you know the way God created the world and he made Adam and Eve, you know the way there was Stone Age because (sic) how are we right here right now?
Karl:	Did you ever hear about the Stone Age?
Finn:	I know where it's from, sometimes its from the *Horrible Histories* and I think they hunted in the forest... Stone Age people.

Children used religious concepts in varying degrees to define the difference between right and wrong, and to explain major questions around birth, growth and death. Even when they deployed religious understandings, children almost always drew upon other sources of knowledge, including scientific knowledge, children's books, and popular culture, to make sense of these issues. In relation to how and why people grow, food, rest and fitness were focused upon below.

Orlaith:	I think (child growing in time-lapse video) grows because his heart gets bigger and bigger and the more your heart grows
Karl:	Your heart gets bigger... So its all food is it?
Children:	Yeah
Mary:	No, I said sleep.
Karl:	Food and sleep. That makes you grow. Does anything else make you grow?
Mairead:	Your lungs and heart

When asked why they thought a plant died, Dean, who is non-religious, stated

Dean: Because everything living dies.
Alan: God.
Karl: (to Alan) Why do you think he decided that?
Dean: (ignoring 'God' response): Because it doesn't have enough food or water where the sun shines down on it and it just dies.

While many children adopted a theist position as part of their worldview, most views on ethical behaviour and 'what is good and just' extended far beyond use of religious explanation. These points are explored further in key finding 3.

Key finding 3: The children displayed an array of 'non-religious' ethical views

Children are a diverse social group who engage actively with different public spheres: media (television, film), education (school and after-school) and consumption and leisure (sport, gaming, toys). It was important to explore their values, with the understanding that while embedded within networks of family, school, friends etc., their own views may not be afforded the same level of status as those of adults. The data below reflects children's responses to hypothetical situations; it was clear that while they revealed much about their own values, many also responded playfully and with a sense of irony to issues that they had little decision-making power over. We explored ethical issues particularly through role-play (where Karl took on a character and talked to children about their lives) and watching videos and discussing the issues arising. Multiple ethical questions arose; including global and local questions of poverty and social justice, sharing with friends, care and wellbeing, prudent use of resources (including saving), children's right to make decisions about things affecting them, and good conduct, reward and punishment.

We showed participants a short film called 'The White Dress', directed by Vanessa Gildea and produced by Brazen Films. This film shows a girl, who lives in an inner-city high rise flat, looking after herself alone during her Communion day. It addresses themes of child independence, poverty and Irish society. In one scene, the girl steals some white ribbons from a pharmacy for her Communion outfit. In another, she uses some money (that was being given out by a man to all the children after Communion) to buy some chips/fries, which she eats alone. It was interesting how dominant conceptions of a 'good' childhood came through in discussions about this film. Contrary to some popular opinion that children making Communion are 'too materialistic', a number of Catholic and non-Catholic children across the study felt a 'good' child was one who saved or spent money wisely. However, they showed varying levels of empathy with the issue of child poverty, with many articulating a more 'middle class' position.

Naoise: I don't really get it cause like she got the em, money and like, she just spended it on chips and she should have bought something really good with it.

Yafa: Well do you think she got a lot of money?
Girls: No
Yafa: What can you buy, I mean why did she go and, she bought chips? Why do you thinks he did that?
Eva: Cause whoever was with her there didn't have a lot of money to pay for all her food and she wanted some food to eat.

One of the most interesting things to emerge was the fact that, when we asked children 'who was watching' the girl when she stole from the pharmacy, children across different settings referred to CCTV or security cameras. This was despite the fact that there was no reference to such cameras in the film. This finding perhaps indicates the extent to which children are conscious of how (their) conduct is monitored in public spaces they frequent.

The scene where the girl steals, provoked key questions about right and wrong. Children's conceptions of right and wrong tended to focus on fair implementation of pre-existing rules, rather than questioning whether the rules were just. In one school context, the following discussion took place. Interestingly, Conor, who lives in a working class area, was one of the only children to point out the girl didn't have any money:

Vincent: (While watching the video) Why did she have to steal?
Conor: Maybe it's because she didn't have enough money to buy the ribbon. But she thought wrong 'cause there are cameras!
Karl: Yeah. Did you see a camera in the shop?
Conor: I saw loads of cameras... in Aldi, in Lidl, loads of shops
Karl: Who do you think is watching you?
Conor: Garda?
Vincent: People that work there?
Karl: Who else watches you?
Elly: Mam, Dad, sister

In another setting:

Mary: I think she should get em, punished and grounded.
Yafa: Punished and grounded? Whats that?
Mary: Em, you should be in your room the whole day
Karl: So that's what Rosie thinks, does anyone have a different view

of what happened?

Dean: I think she should have been caught on camera aaam, she shouldn't have done it and... she should go to jail!

It was also interesting that some implicitly positioned themselves as 'Western' in comparison to people from contexts considered poorer or less privileged. For example, after watching a short video on child hunger, Alan said he felt 'sad' when thinking about children who go hungry. But despite there being no reference to Africa or Africans in the video, he stated 'cause people like, people in Africa don't get food'. Some children of migrant background living in relative affluence in Ireland also positioned themselves as different to less well off people from their country of origin. While many children of migrant background described themselves as 'Irish but not from Ireland', some were more likely than others to position themselves as 'Western' in a superior sense. Faith (who is Irish with a Zimbabwean family) for example, acknowledged her grandmother lived in a lower standard house, but pointed out certain greater freedoms she felt children had there:

Faith: We got to go to the shops by ourselves and buy lots of things
Karl: Like what?
Faith: Like sweets and bread and everything
Karl; So that's the best part of living there?
Faith: And we didn't have to wearing the shoes

Returning to the question of child consumption, children demonstrated varying degrees of interest in 'getting things'. Many of the objects or spaces they valued were not seen or experienced in individualistic terms. They were in fact situated within valued, reciprocal relationships: particularly friends, family and pets.

Karl: What other kind of stuff apart from money might you get at Communion time?

Gerard: Like somebody takes you somewhere where you love the most... like I go to the shop with my Godfather and I always wanted a bouncy ball and its lets say 50 euros and he pays for it.

The connection between material objects and religious practice is returned to in Key Finding 7; for now it is worth noting that a complex

picture emerged regarding what a 'good' childhood entailed. They were conscious of many aspects of being a 'good' child and living a good life that were closely monitored by adults. Again, however in the context of their peer group, they could gently mock the messages they received, e.g. in relation to health.

Karl:	What does a healthy person do?
Girls	(with mock attitude) *Run, walk, exercise*
Karl:	And what about an unhealthy person?
Orlaith:	Sit and watch TV!
Karl:	Would you say you're healthy or unhealthy?
Naoise:	Both
Karl:	That's a good answer Naoise! Why's that?
Naoise:	I eat chocolate and vegetables

While children generally trusted the knowledge and experience of the adults structured into their lives through school and home, they did not 'imbibe' this knowledge; they reinterpreted it within the context of their peer groups, our research interactions, and the multiple sources of knowledge available to them.

Key finding 4: Religion played a variable role in children's family and community life

Majid: On Friday, on one o'clock when my dad comes home early, me and my dad goes to prayer? It's just, you know the, take the road ahead and go left and that's where I pray.

Interestingly, despite Majid's remarks, there was little suggestion from any child participating in the study that religious tradition, observance or discussion was their defining experience of family life. This was more clearly the case with the majority of white settled Irish Catholic participants. In contrast to the older children interviewed in Smyth et al's (2013) study, the children in our study did not appear to raise religious or moral themes explicitly with their families. We could look at this statement in two ways: on the one hand, as stated above, many of these younger children had little sense of agency when it comes to asking relatively abstract questions or contributing on religious or ethical themes with adults. Below, Prabha expresses her annoyance at feeling sidelined when attending (born-again Christian) services as a family.

Prabha: Well I pray with my little brother, my big brother, and – with them I pray
Karl: Do you pray with your mom and dad?
Prabha: Not with my mom and dad
Karl: Why not?
Prabha: Because they are too mean, too bossy.
Karl: Do they ever bring you somewhere to pray?
Prabha: Well, when they bring me some were to pray they say 'do this do that, get away from me'

On the other, we could simply state that the children in our study tended not to prioritise religious affiliation, belief or belonging when giving accounts of family. Instead they tended to focus on wider relationships with siblings, the caring work that their parents did, times their parents were unavailable to them because of work or community commitments, and of course, valued objects and spaces in the family home (such as toys, bedrooms, etc.). As indicated already, most saw the consequences of their actions first in terms of worldly (parental/institutional) rules, with a varying sense or investment in a religious or theological sense of their

importance. A small minority of children who identified as having no religion/not believing in God focused on their parents as the key source of adjudication of right and wrong.

For many children of migrant background, accounts of family difference focused on the multilingual household and on relationships with extended family in other places. But this of course depended on how interchangeable religious identity was with ethnic identity, and whether access to a local ethno-religious community (e.g. via a mosque, church etc.) was available. Amelia's example below provides an insight into how certain children of migrant background observe traditions used by their parents, but do not necessarily participate in them if they are of low priority to their lives here and now.

Amelia:	My Dad, I don't know (what he says) when we're eating at the table, and then we start to eat
Karl:	You don't know what he says?
Amelia:	Yeah he says something from Romanian about God
Karl:	Oh does he? Okay. Is he praying or was he doing something else? (Doesn't know. Did you ever ask him? No? Does he say other things to God in Romanian?
Amelia:	Yeah. (In a list-making tone) Like 'help us, be nice, please help us'
Karl:	And when does he say those things?
Amelia:	Em when we start to eat
Karl:	But no other times
Amelia:	No

A relatively small number of children in the study reported attending frequent/weekly religious services with their families, with certain children of migrant background more commonly referring to frequent observance. Family – and in particular, extended family – became an important theme for many children when discussing key life rituals such as baptisms, weddings and First Holy Communion. A sense of intergenerational connectedness was maintained through religious ritual for some Catholic children of European migrant background. Some reported travelling to religious ceremonies in their, or their parents' home country; we also met extended migrant family at Communion ceremonies for example, who came from other parts of Europe and Ireland, to be present.

Julia:	I (would like to) make Communion in Irland (sic) *and* Poland

Karl: What's good about Ireland?
Julia: (pause); I have a friend, cousin
Karl: Yes, and what's good about Poland?
Julia: I have there friends too, and there is my Grandma and Grandpa

Regular attendance at religious services/prayers provided a focal point for a sense of community belonging for certain families and children, more than others. Below, Tariq and Faith separately describe their participation in weekly religious services in broader cultural terms, and demonstrate further how ethno-religious community was sewn into their family life and vice versa.

Karl: The mosque? And do you go to it?
Tariq: Yeah some Fridays
Yafa; And what happens there?
Tariq: Everybody prays and when you finish praying there's a shop and you can buy chicken and buy some sweets
...
Yafa: Why would you buy a chicken in a Muslim shop and not in Centra or Superquinn for example?
Tariq: Because some places there is like only for Muslim and a Christian buys that too. You know the food that they really eat you *have* to look at the packet it has to say something like halal,
Karl: Ah. What's halal?
Tariq: Halal means in Muslim it's good to eat

Karl: What's the (Methodist) church like? Is it fun? (yes) what's fun about it?
Faith: Because we get to go to Sunday school and we get to play
Karl: Give me an example of what you do
Faith: We will draw lots of pictures and make cards for Valentine's Day and father and mum's Day
Karl: And who does the Sunday school with you?
Faith: My (cousin) - Chris

Majority (settled, white) Irish Catholic children were less likely to have experienced/be dependent on formal religious community for a sense of

belonging to their locality. One could argue that Catholic schools offered this sense of belonging; but at another level, given their more established intergenerational presence, and longer investment in local contexts, it was likely that other modes of belonging and parental involvement were more available to them (e.g. GAA, parents' association, etc.). Perhaps due to the greater cultural emphasis on occasional rituals and celebrations over frequent formalised religious observance, many majority ethnic children tended to distance themselves from the greater involvement of religious figures and the ongoing commitment of older 'more religious' generations.

Aoife:	I wouldn't like to be in a church all the time
Dean:	I wouldn't like to be a nun because I'm not a girl and I wouldn't like to dress up in black and white all the time...
Karl:	Ok. Could you be a priest?
Chorus:	Yeah
Eva:	If you're a boy you could be a priest
Karl:	And do you think any of the boys here would like to be a priest?
Eva:	I don't know
Izzy:	No. Because you'd be talking for a half an hour
Jason:	I wouldn't like to be a priest because every single day and every single night you would have to go into the church and talk for about an hour, two hours, three hours, four hours, five hours, six hours, seven hours, eight hours, nine hours or ten hours!

Across different settings, many of these children held implicit views on what was 'too much' in this regard; making the limits of their religious identification an important question. To go beyond these limits, practically or geographically speaking, could be something of a stretch. For example, we discussed the likelihood of attending church while on holidays with Cara:

Karl:	Where have you been on the plane Cara?
Cara:	I've been in France
Karl:	Would you go to the church in France if you were there?
Cara:	No! It's a holiday?!
Karl:	Is that not part of going on holiday?
Cara:	No.

Key finding 5: Religion and gender played a role in children's friendship and peer belonging

Echoing Devine et al's (2008) research on multi-ethnic children's cultures in Ireland, the children's relationships were dynamic and involved multiple layers of belonging, inclusion and exclusion. While girls' and boys' interests tended to be fluid rather than be rigidly defined, particularly in relation to popular cultural figures, TV shows and sports participation, one of the most significant patterns in relationships – including having 'best friends' - was based around gender. Schools and after-school activities also help to structure friendships in ways that offer status to age; children tended to favour friends their own age, while those with close relationships to older siblings also looked up to them and their friends. The significance of gender to belonging and forging relationships, and to defining age-related competence, was clear in certain interests, e.g. in relation to playing for or supporting a certain football team, attending dance class, video gaming, playing with 'dress-up' versus 'action' toys and figures, in terms of the pseudonyms children sometimes chose for interview (such as male superheroes, fashion dolls etc.) and in terms of clothing and style preferences, not least in relation to dressing for Communion and other celebrations. Children also tended to elect to be interviewed with children of the same gender. Modes of engagement with peers and with us as researchers could follow clearly gendered patterns, e.g. in terms of using 'gross-out' humour and 'slagging' as ways to gain status as a boy. Further evidence of the socialisation of children in gendered terms is discussed in Key Finding 7 with specific reference to preparation for Communion.

On the surface, religious affiliation and practice did not impede the formation of friendships. However, children in multi-religious settings could come into conflict with each other regarding truth claims and the 'centrality' or 'superiority' of one belief system and set of practices 'over' another. This interaction was not simply down to religious belief, but also ethnicised and gendered practices of 'showing dominance':

Conor: I know who goes to Arabic school in our class: Kareem and Majid
Ismail: And me!
Conor: And Tariq

Karl: How do you know that they go (Conor)?
Conor: (imitating) Because they always tell us 'we're going to Arabic school today, we're going to Arabic school tomorrow today'
...
Conor: But there is such thing as God. That's why there's a book called the Bible. If somebody makes it, that means its real. There's loads, there's millions...
Majid: We have a Qur'an
Conor: ... of stories
Majid: Yeah the Qur'an has all the stories from the Bible. All of the other ones. And it has even more.

Some children presented their understandings of the religious practices of other social groups in what appeared to be a relatively neutral manner, particularly in the Educate Together setting. Below, Chris, a Methodist boy of Zimbabwean heritage, tells us about Muslim practices around food that he has 'learned from a friend' in his neighbourhood.

Yafa: So there are some things that Muslims are not allowed to eat, like pig for example?
Chris: Yeah, and sweets like Coca-Cola bottles they're not allowed to eat that. I have a next-door neighbour he's a Muslim and he said they're not allowed to, and if people eat ham and they're eatin' ham they're not to... or they have to go and shower. Isn't it (Muslim boy)?
Yafa: Oh right, ok. And so jellies, they're not allowed to eat jellies.
Chris: Yeah, some gelatins, they're not allowed

However, we observed a pattern across different case study sites where typically children of majority ethnic and religious backgrounds – namely white, Irish Catholic children – would position children of minority religious and non-religious background as 'other' or 'not the norm'. Children presented interpretations of 'other' religious symbols, figures and practices in satirical/parodying manner at times, drawing on television and film, and the photos of religious practices we presented. Certainly, children could interpret their own traditions, religious and otherwise, in a playful manner that they knew would not, and perhaps should not be taken seriously because they had not reached society's age-related benchmark of being religiously 'knowing'. However, regardless of a playful intention,

those who did not correspond to school ideals of what a 'good' child was were at times considered 'other'. This appeared to be a product of the children's peer group positioning but also the influence of the school setting. It implicit in many children's language in second class in Catholic settings that being non-Catholic was a 'failure to live up to the norm'. While below, Colin's comments about Dean cannot be assumed reducible to his non-religious status, Dean was conscious of being 'different', and school life could be difficult for him at times.

Colin: Well Dean (non-religious child) gets extra homework every single year.
Karl: Why?
Colin: Well he's really always bold, messing, stuff like that.

Dean told us that he was 'always the odd one out'; the exchange below reflects how he was constantly reminded of this, particularly around the intense time of Communion:

Dean: I feel left out. I'm literally the odd one out in second class.
Mairead: You don't believe in God, you didn't get your Communion, you haven't been baptised...
Dean: I know, that's the whole point of not getting, when you're a baby you don't get baptised

In Catholic settings, it was clear that a number of children felt that Baptism was the normal way to mark one's birth and that non-baptised peers were 'not holy' and lacking in this regard. Part of the issue here was that children, within their school contexts, did not have a language to talk about non-religious and non-Catholic children's ethical beliefs and values. For example, children in one Catholic school suggested that those who were not baptised 'forgot to do it', and did not think outside of this view. Some children were more aware than others of the limits of their knowledge in this regard, and it appeared that the interview space allowed them to explore these issues for the first time. Again, Chloe refers to Dean (in his absence) below:

Chloe: There is a boy in our class who doesn't believe in God that, so he is not having his Communion... they (non-baptised, non-religious children) don't like God so they em, don't pray to

	him, and talk to the devil
Karl:	So they just don't talk (to God)?
Chloe:	No
…	
Yafa:	And they talk to the devil then?
Chloe:	I suppose, I'm supposing. Like if they don't believe in God they obviously don't talk to him
Adam:	What do you mean by 'they talk to the devil'?
Chloe:	Obviously they probably believe in the devil so?
Adam:	Devil?!
Karl:	So they have to believe in something Chloe is it?
Chloe:	Yeah
Mairead:	I don't believe in him!

Key finding 6: The children experienced social class and ethnic differentiation inside and outside Religion and school

The schools that we visited compared differently in terms of social class makeup. In combination with the significance of gender, it was clear that neighbourhood (and perceptions of neighbourhood) played a role in the development of friendships and children's free time in and outside of school. Children were sensitive to feelings of safety and security in their environments – as illustrated in some references to feelings of God and church community as protective and nurturing. But in explicit social class terms, children could interpret certain neighbourhoods as 'good' or 'bad' to live, and cou=ld self-monitor accordingly:

Harry: No I don't live in (DEIS Band 1 school district). D'you know Fairmount? I live just when you get to Fairmount you go straight down and, it's really knackery (smiling)

Karl: What's that mean?

Harry: … On the week days like on Tuesday, at night, a load of teenagers who are supposed to be doing their homework or being in bed being outside and they're like taking stuff from the bins and throwing it up on the road

Karl: And do all of them do that? Is it just some of them do that or all of them?

Graham: Some of them, and like at night I hear them outside so sometimes I just look out the window and like I just watch them, so I can, so I won't do it.

A significant body of research into the different growing up experiences of low-income and working class children, and of middle class and affluent children has developed internationally. The *Growing Up in Ireland* study found that 9 year-olds from less advantaged backgrounds are less likely to be involved in after-school, structured enrichment activities which likely enhance academic achievement (McCoy et al. 2012). One of the more interesting, yet tentative findings from our participants concerned the difference between what American sociologist Annette Lareau (2003) calls middle class strategies of 'concerted cultivation' and the more working class tendency towards 'accomplishment of natural growth'. The idea of concerted cultivation is that families with greater cultural,

social and financial resources can give more time towards parent-child discussion, structured enrichment activities and encouraging reflective activity amongst their children. 'Accomplishment of natural growth' sees less resourced parents focusing on providing for their children's basic needs and caring/allowing for the natural development of talents and capabilities, with less strategic emphasis on how to promote values and skills that would give their child an advantage at school. It was of note for example, how children from more working class backgrounds, and Traveller children, positioned themselves as involved in more 'adult-like' activities, which were not valued by school. For example, Conor related:

Karl:	If you had one thing to give away, what would it be?
Conor:	PSP games I already gave to someone and I got a pair of football boots, a football and football gloves... I bought them in the shop
Karl:	With whose money?
Conor:	A fella he gave me 20 euro for 6 PSP games
...	
Karl:	How did you arrange that?
Conor:	He's next door to my sister

Given how Catholic sacramental preparation are particularly clearly sewn into the structure of Catholic schools (typically at 2nd and 6th class), a tentative exploration of the reasons why *Catholic children were making Communion* offered some limited insights from a child-level perspective into (a) the level of independence and criticality children showed regarding school structure and culture and (b) the degree to which they openly negotiated questions of tradition and growing up with their parents. Although participating children were in general, positively disposed towards school, those associated with a more working class environment, particularly boys, were more likely to report not liking school, typically when discussing work and 'performance'. This echoed McCoy et al. (2012)'s research.

Karl:	What do you think of school?
Patrick:	Boring.
Karl:	Is it? What's boring?
Patrick:	Work.
Karl:	All of it?

Patrick and Samuel: Yeah.

Samuel: But the only thing that's not boring is colouring and making art.

Karl: Do you like that Patrick?

Patrick: I hate colouring homework... I only like going home.... Go to bed.

As formally structured activities, some children expressed a similar wish not to engage with Mass attendance during Communion year, and their rehearsal for the Communion ceremony. Some indications of a more general pattern of knowledge about school as an institution and active/passive negotiation of growing up processes were evident in how children answered the question of 'why' they were 'making Communion'. A key case was that of Lily, who was christened shortly prior to receipt of First Holy Confession/the Sacrament of Penance. She described her sense of relief having been christened, stating she 'felt more better'. While struggling somewhat, Lily named a number of different factors in explaining the importance of this tradition. First Communion was a highly significant marker of coming of age, one that one of her cousins was returning from England to receive. Interestingly, she and some children in a separate DEIS Band 1 school hypothesised that children who did not make Communion would be 'held back' from moving on to the next class/grade.

Lily: I was worried, in case I wouldn't be able to get it (Communion)

Karl: What worried you?

Lily: Cause I wanted to make my Confirmation with the rest of my cousins and friends

Karl: And how do you mean you were worried, what was going on?

Lily: I wouldn't be able to make my Communion

Karl: And would that be bad?

Lily: I wouldn't be able to make my Confirmation either

...

Yafa: Would it be alright if you didn't do your Communion?

Lily: No, I wanted to do my Communion anyway

Karl: Why did you want to do it?

Lily: Cause I wanted to wear my dress and get my hair done and make more money so I could get my phone

There was some disdain expressed by some adults across the study and indeed in the media, which would implicitly position Lily's latter words within her wider family context as 'religiously inauthentic' (e.g. Sheridan 2012). But such a view fails to account for a potentially greater dependency on Communion as a public symbol of family caring and investment, and fulfillment of gender ideals, in areas of lower income and lower social status generally (within a society that actively structures Communion into the lives of the majority of school-going children). Such judgment could also overemphasise 'visible' aspects of religion such as the sacraments, at the expense of recognising less visible practices. For example, Lily described in striking detail the purposes to which she, her mother and her Nan put a candle they received earlier in the year:

Lily: Like every night we're supposed to pray and every morning we're meant to pray for people who are, died
Karl: Do you do that... on your own?
Lily: Well my mother would give me a lighter to light it but then she would stay in the kitchen with me
Karl: What do you say?
Lily: I like pray for people who have died, people of my relation like of Maria Fox - she died and she had three kids but the father heard about it but he came down all the way from England to collect the kids to bring them up so the kids wouldn't get hurt down here... cause their Grandda always goes out and he's very silly, he does very silly things when he is drunk.

...

Karl: And who else do you pray to?
Lily: My Greatnan Susan, and I might pray for my, and oh Billy, he's another relation of Maria, he's Maria's brother, he died as well and my Nan's neighbour died. But my Nan moved cause she didn't want to stay there after because she was scared of someone upstairs. So sometimes I might pray for other people if they died, or if my Nan told me I might pray for them

Children from more affluent and middle class backgrounds indicated they felt more *notional* room to question the process of Communion as part of wider Catholic schooling processes. We use the term 'notional' here, because, as indicated throughout this report, the majority of children in Catholic schools tended to see Communion as a 'normal' part of growing

up, or *as growing up itself.* When asked 'who decides' whether he would 'do Communion' or not, the following children playfully argued:

Tommy:	Myself
Sarah:	Parents
Vincent:	Maybe both of them. Maybe we will have a vote

As our earlier discussion indicates, children referred to religious and ethnic community sometimes interchangeably. But as also noted in Key Finding 2, children's concepts of difference were place-specific; school ethos and the range of ethnic, linguistic and religious difference amongst children impacted on their knowledge of difference, and how they positioned themselves relative to 'different' others positively and negatively. It was notable for example, that children in one Catholic school who had some awareness of ethnic and national difference (influenced by a small number of migrant classmates) still saw Catholicism as (the universal) religion; they interpreted photos of Indian Hindu practices as being 'Indian Catholic'. Discussions where there were a majority of migrant children were a lot more self-conscious about the plasticity of Irishness. Yet Irish children of migrant and non-Catholic background in such a setting (which happened to be in an Educate Together school) could still identify the historically dominant reduction of 'Catholic' and 'Communion' to 'being national (white) Irish' and vice versa. Robert (below) identifies as Moldovan, and does not mention engaging in religious practice of any kind. Chris, quoted earlier, is part of an African Methodist community and goes to Sunday school.

Karl:	What's making Communion mean?
Robert:	I don't know that
Karl:	Can anyone do it?
Robert:	Some peoples can, well not anyone
Karl:	Who are those people?
Chris:	(gasps, hand up) I know, Catholic people!
Karl:	What are they?
Chris:	They're like, Irish people!
Yafa:	Are you Irish?
Chris:	Yeah
Yafa:	So, are you Catholic as well?
Chris:	No, not really... Em, well, I'm half Zimbabwean and half Irish

Karl: Do you have to be Catholic to be Irish?
Chris: Mm, not everyone has to be Catholic to be Irish but, I don't know

Similarly, in another Catholic school with a small number of migrant children, we discussed how a child in another school would hypothetically feel if she was 'not making Communion'. Again, Catholicism, being light-skinned and settled Irish were seen as central to true Irishness. Ronan, a white-Irish boy, discusses the issue with Hasan, an Irish boy of Bangladeshi Muslim heritage, and Samuel, an Irish boy of Filipino Catholic heritage.

Ronan: (She's not sad) like 'cause she's a different religion. She could be Irish.
Hasan: I am Irish.
Samuel: No you aren't
Ronan: No you're not, you're Bangladesh-ish!
Samuel: (laughs)
Hasan: I was born in Ireland
Samuel: No you're Bangladesh – if you were Ireland you would have light skin. You have dark-as-brown skin.

This brief moment reflects wider evidence of how minority ethnic, religious and non-religious children and families are changing dominant conceptions of local and Irish belonging 'from below' with limited state support and resources, but with the support, where possible, of their school communities and peers (Devine 2011; Lentin and Moreo 2012; Kitching 2014).

Key finding 7: 'Communion' remains significant to coming of age, and children participate in its reinterpretation

School-based preparation and family intergenerational support for the sacrament of Communion meant it continues to be cultivated as a strongly normative event which marks advancing membership of 'our community', particularly in Catholic school localities (Lodge 1999). It was happily associated for many Catholic children with the fulfilment of connected, gendered life stages that were held as locally traditional and, to a limited extent, sacred. Indeed, children (and some adults) interchangeably referenced marriage and Communion when discussing persistently significant symbols such as the 'white dress' and other aspects of dress. In Catholic schools, preparation for Communion was heavily integrated as both a normal feature of school participation and coming of age. The degree of integration of sacramental preparation in children's wider Catholic school experience in second class is illustrated well in the excerpt below. When discussing the *My First Holy Communion and Penance* workbook that they used, we asked one second class group:

Karl: And what do you need to do with that book, why do you have it, can you explain what's in it?
Orlaith: It's just like telling us what prayers and it's all about when you got baptised and your Communion
Karl: And do you know any, are there prayers in it?
Children: Yeah. Are there songs in it? Yeah
Mairead: We did a poem in it this morning.
Others: A prayer.
Karl: What was the prayer?
Children: *I confess to almighty God and to you my brothers and sisters*
Karl: And is that the first time you did it?
Children: No.
(Unidentified child): At Mass.
Karl: Does everyone in the room do it?
Children: Yeah (despite there being non-Catholics in the room).
Teacher: For a special reason, what's the reason we did it?
Eva: (Gasp) For assembly tomorrow... we say prayers and we sing songs and people who got two stars with their spellings, their English tests, they get a certificate.

Children generally expressed greater agency and excitement about after-Communion celebrations. While of course associated with a more cultural than sacred approach to Communion in wider Irish society, we would also point out that this focus amongst many Catholic children also reflects the relatively greater agency children can exercise in the more informal domains of leisure, play, commercial and popular culture, than the more formal domain of religious observance. Of course, these domains overlap and intermingle in children's experience; as our findings show, children experience Religion in person-specific ways. Furthermore, collective rituals do not totally define childhood religious experience, and the commercialised aspects of Communion are usually experienced in quite a social manner. Even though they looked forward to Communion gifts and could competitively boast about them, Catholic girls and boys of a variety of social class and ethnic backgrounds were well aware that the Communion ceremony was 'not about' (or not reducible to) money and presents: family, celebration and to varying extents, closeness to God and the sacredness of the Eucharist were also prioritised. Excitement about the ceremony reflects the vital importance of family and extended family to children, and the greater capacity for families to define the meaning of the celebration and a 'good' childhood in contemporary Irish society, despite, or perhaps alongside the efforts of the institutional church to define its parameters (e.g. through obligations for mass attendance throughout the year, enrolment ceremonies, and general supervision of school-based preparation).

Middle class children in particular were more likely to explore questions about tradition, but typically did not feel the need to voice these questions with adults. Despite their notional contestation of the traditional white dress through pictures they drew for example, girls in general shirked the idea that one could actually wear non-white clothing/dress on Communion day. Any challenge to culturally defined dress practices was seen as pure play, not realistic and not desirable. The discussion below even references the notion of citizenship, of 'playing your part'. Interestingly, Vanessa uses the term 'theme' from fashion discourse to reframe the white dress tradition:

Yafa: Why do you have to all wear dresses and all of them need to be white?

Vanessa: It's a special day!

Cara:	Boys have to wear trousers
Vanessa:	No they wear suits!
Yafa:	If your favourite colour is red, why don't you wear your red dress, you could wear your pink dress, you could have your yellow dress, then we would have a very colourful day?
Cara:	No, no it's a holy day!
Vanessa:	It's kinda a white theme... its like a white theme of the whole thing
Yafa:	What's a holy day?
Cara:	Its kind of like you go to mass, and do your part. That you have to do
Karl:	Do you have a part?
Cara:	No, not yet!
Karl:	You will have a part? (Cara indicates yes) ok.

The question of independence is an important part of child culture, given that 'voice' is less afforded to children on the basis of their relative age, in differing public spheres. Children draw upon multiple age and school-related events to 'benchmark' their status, such as birthdays, having a mobile phone, being in a certain class at school, etc. Still, children's discussions about Communion, dress and presents reflected the fact that this process involved, for them, effectively fulfilling a ritual designed largely by adults in a rapidly changing Ireland. This ritual defines multiple and valued signs of 'being grown up', including receiving a 'holy' sacrament, being dressed a certain way, becoming more fully a member of 'God's family', carrying oneself and in particular, 'behaving' appropriately, being publicly celebrated and acknowledged, and receiving special presents. Children themselves were particularly conscious of how their behaviour was heavily monitored through the entire Communion process.

Yafa;	How would you behave on (Communion) day?
Fionn:	Rock and rolly
Yafa:	What's rock and rolly? Do you like it?
Fionn:	It's being crazy
Yafa:	And how do you have to behave in the church
Fionn:	Quiet all the time
Yafa;	And you don't like to be quiet, what would you prefer to do?
Fionn:	Run around

In summary, the Catholic children we encountered were broadly excited about family, celebration, concerned with being recognised as a 'good' child, and about coming of age in their locality. Yet they challenged and criticised aspects of its formality and adult-centredness. Similar to findings in the American context (Ridgely Bales 2005) our return visits to some schools after Communion indicated to us that (while children and families differ, and children reflected positively on their first experience of the Eucharist), a growing formal belonging to the Catholic Church was not a significant trend. But given its structuring into the rhythms of the majority of primary schools in Ireland, First Holy Communion can be understood as having a continued, significant but not totalising cultural role in 'benchmarking' a child's life at a particular point in time in Ireland. It is a complex, largely adult-defined ritual of belief, belonging and care, self-expression and monitoring, and involves layers of inclusion and exclusion within child culture and between homes and schools.

Conclusion: 'The more things change...'?

Children in Ireland are a highly diverse social group, who are involved in their own development and in negotiating what a 'good' childhood entails. But this happens in more or less visible, permitted and active ways. Many children in the study implicitly trusted the guidance and experience of adults regarding formal religious traditions and sacred practices. They showed a similar level of trust in other formal arenas: such as the running of their schools, and wider societal moral judgments about what a 'good' childhood entails. However, this did not mean children could not, or did not explore and contest these traditions, practices and judgments from inside and outside religious belonging and belief. Many children expressed a variety of connections to, and knowledge of religious practices and ethical questions, but having low age-related status, they were not as agentic in exploring such domains as adults. Informal settings, experiences and learning opportunities offered children greater capacity for to show their knowledge and expertise, and to be visible on their own terms. Many of the children in the study – who were predominantly Catholic – did not report regularly attending religious services (outside of Communion year). Children across differing settings and groups generally did not interpret their wider worlds in a 'theocentric' way, rather they drew to varying degrees on religious, scientific, consumer and popular cultural discourses to make sense of the world around them, and to position themselves morally. We saw tentative suggestions that, on the basis of social class-related cultural and social advantage, certain children in Catholic schools are more 'in the know' regarding what the Communion ceremony is about within the wider context of 'what school is about', e.g. how one progresses through school. Furthermore, as previous research indicates, a persisting assumption across different settings is that to be Irish is to be white, settled/majority ethnic, and Catholic (Devine et al. 2008; Parker-Jenkins and Masterson 2013; Kitching 2014).

In our study, Communion was found to have a continued, significant role in 'benchmarking' a point in children's lives in relation to other children. Along with Baptism, Communion remains significant as a gendered benchmark that makes being Catholic at this time 'the norm' for boys and girls. This is the case even when Catholic families approach it more as a cultural 'coming of age' than a matter of spirituality, closeness to

God, or church belonging. Many other ways of belonging to the school and to friendship groups existed: sports, fashion, music, video games, neighbourhood play, afterschool classes, etc. Our wider data shows Catholic school staffs and children were conscious of the tensions of inclusion and exclusion, and never actively excluded children on the basis of 'not making their Communion'. Yet still, amongst children, the structuring of Communion into school time in certain settings reinforced some children as 'belonging more' to the school community and to local, public processes of coming of age at a particular point. By comparison, the absence of Communion from school time in other settings tended to render it of much less significance in terms of growing up or belonging to the school community in children's eyes. It is in this context that we can suggest that First Holy Communion remains an idealised symbol of 'normal' and/or Irish' growing up in Catholic schools, which are the main kind of education available to most children in the country. At the same time, amongst Catholics and across school communities, First Holy Communion is subject to family-led personalisation and children's diverse interpretations.

This report has explored some complex and challenging issues from the perspectives of 7-8 year-old children. We have not aimed to resolve issues around school patronage or what counts as a 'good' childhood, but to add to current understandings of children's lives and experiences in Ireland. Our overarching message is that *children themselves actively and collectively interpret what a 'good' childhood is and how it should be lived*. They do this in diverse ways, depending on their circumstances; using their own specific language, and their own interpretations of popular media, religious and secular spaces, and sacred and consumer practices and objects. Their interpretations and practices are deeply embedded in (but not determined by) their relationships with significant others, and the experiences they are afforded. In this regard, future discussions about education policy and practice regarding school governance and religious education in Ireland need to make deliberate, structural efforts to take the experiences, interpretive capacities and decision-making capabilities of young children seriously.

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This report presents seven key findings from a wider research study of childhood and social change in the Republic of Ireland. The study is called 'Making Communion: Disappearing and Emerging Forms of Childhood in Ireland'. The report focuses specifically on children's beliefs, values, and the forms of belonging available to them in religious and non-religious terms across a range of settings. It centralises children's own interpretations of their lives and worlds.

The report is written for schools and families. It will also be of interest to education policy makers, teacher educators, teacher unions, religious, atheist, humanist and philosophical communities, and children's advocacy groups.