

“It’s no big deal”. What happens to children opted-out of religious instruction and sacramental preparation in Irish Catholic primary schools? The perspectives and practices of principals.

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KEYWORDS: Primary education, religious instruction, sacramental preparation, inclusion, ‘opt-out’.

INTRODUCTION

As a newly qualified teacher in my first (Catholic) school, the class contained a number of children whose parents held various religious beliefs and ‘none’. During my first religious instruction lesson, these children (those not of Catholic faith) quietly took out their reading books or homework. Curious, I asked other teachers in the school what happened in their classes during religious instruction lessons. They all had similar responses, the children whose parent’s had ‘opted out’ of religious instruction did the same; some even got to do colouring. It seemed to be accepted, and no one queried it or spoke with any of the children’s parents. This practice seemed exclusionary to me. When I finally spoke with the principal, I asked if we could try to find some way to include these children in the lessons, to allow them to contribute and share their own beliefs, their culture, their traditions and views. But my suggestions were not acted upon. I have encountered similar variations of this response over the years, which translates as almost an ambivalence. This ambivalence, in part, provided the stimulus for this study.

Religious instruction and sacramental preparation are part of every-day school life for most children in Irish primary schools, with almost 90 per cent of schools under the patronage of the Catholic Church (Central Statistics Office, 2020). A report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) showed that Irish primary schools are second only to Israel in the amount of time spent on religious instruction (OECD, 2014). Religious instruction has been ubiquitous in Irish Catholic primary schools almost since the establishment of the national system of education in Ireland in 1831.

Over the past 20 years however, Ireland has experienced a significant growth of inward migration which is reflected in the increasing levels of ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity in schools (Faas, Darmody & Sokolowska, 2015; Hession, 2013; Kitching, 2020). This cultural shift, coupled with the considerable rise in those identifying as having no religion, or identifying as atheist or agnostic (CSO, 2019) has resulted in an increase in the number of parents opting their children out of religious instruction and sacramental preparation lessons in primary schools. To explore these issues, nine principals of Irish Catholic primary schools were interviewed. As there are over 3000 primary schools in the Republic of Ireland, these nine schools were specifically chosen as they could reasonably be expected to reflect other similar-type schools. The schools selected fell into one of three categories:

- (i) predominately ‘Catholic, White and Gaelic’ (Parker-Jenkins & Masterson, 2013)
- (ii) schools with some religious diversity
- (iii) schools with significant religious diversity

A mix of primary school types were also selected; DEIS band I and II, non-DEIS, small, medium and large schools and inner city, urban and rural schools. These interviews were multi-purposeful. For this article the focus will be on two specific areas, they are (a) the percentage of children opted-out of religious instruction and sacramental preparation in their schools, and (b) what their current practices and perspectives were for accommodating children opted out.

CONTEXT

Those identifying with a minority religion in Ireland has grown significantly over the past decade: Muslim by 29 per cent, Orthodox by 38 per cent and Hindu by 34 per cent (Central Statistics Office, 2016). Furthermore, the number of people identifying as having no religious belief or identifying as atheist or agnostic has risen by 64 per cent since 2011 to almost half a million people in the last census (CSO, 2016). It has been posited that “considering these trends the issue of religion and belief identity is of growing political and educational importance” (Darmody & Smyth, 2017, p. 17).

The right to not attend denominational religious instruction classes in Irish primary schools is enshrined in both the Constitution of Ireland (1937) and the Irish Education Act (1998). Article 44.2.4 of the Irish Constitution states that children do not have to attend religious instruction classes if it is the wish of parents or guardians. Rule 69 – 2(a) of the Rules for National Schools (1965) states that: “No pupil shall receive, or be present at, any religious instruction of which his parents or guardians disapprove.” The terms ‘religious education’ and ‘religious instruction’ are sometimes used interchangeably when describing what takes place during religious lessons in Irish Catholic primary schools. Historically in Ireland, the term ‘religious instruction’ has been used in the Constitution and legal documents and circulars to refer to the educating into a particular religious tradition. Religious education generally aims to adopt a broader approach than religious instruction and seeks to open children to learning about different beliefs in society (Coolahan, 1981). Concerning religious education, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2015) state that the development and implementation of the curriculum in religious education in primary schools is the responsibility of the relevant patron bodies, which as mentioned earlier is overwhelmingly the Catholic Church, at just under 90 per cent.

The current provisions for children opted-out of religious instruction and sacramental preparation in Irish primary schools have been called into question and are considered inadequate on human rights grounds (Kilkelly, 2009; Irish Human Rights Commission, 2011; Mawhinney, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2015) .

Ireland has been widely criticised by national and international human rights groups for the lack of suitable opting-out possibilities in primary schools (Council Of Europe, 2017; IHRC, 2011; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016). The IHRC cautioned that “unless religion classes are moved outside of the school day, human rights standards suggest that it is necessary to put in place mechanisms to ensure supervision of children who wish to be exempted” (2011, p. 100). The Minister of Education at the time commented that “Ireland will continue to be the subject of international criticism if it does not move to address the concerns raised by the monitoring committees of the international human rights treaties to which it is a party” (Quinn, 2014, p. 6). Concerns have also been raised that children are not being ensured the right to effectively opt-out of religious classes, in addition to a lack of appropriate alternatives to such classes (UN, 2016). Ireland has been repeatedly called on by the European Convention on Human Rights to promote the establishment of non-denominational and multi-denominational schools to accommodate the growing religious and cultural diversity in Ireland (Jacobs, Whyte & Ovey, 2010).

The Irish State has moved to assure UN Committees that the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is protected in schools (Mawhinney, 2007). In 2015 in their reports to the UNCRC and the COE, Ireland repeatedly referred to Article 44.2.4 to indicate that a child's freedom of thought, conscience and religion was protected in Irish primary schools (Mawhinney, 2015). As well as the State, both the Catholic Church and the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism (FOPP) have addressed the issue of children opted out of religious instruction and sacramental preparation in primary schools. The FOPP was established by the government in 2011, whose main objective was to ensure that a greater diversity of patronage be available in primary schools. The Programme for Government (2014) committed to achieving a target of at least 400 divested multi-denominational primary schools by 2030 to improve parental choice. As of March 2021 that number stands at 15. The FOPP underlined that provisions in schools remained inappropriate and inadequate on human rights grounds because children who had been opted-out were being deprived of the opportunity to learn about other religions and ethics and to develop knowledge, values and attitudes towards religions (Coolahan, Hussey & Kilfeather, 2012).

Regarding the options schools can provide to parents when a request to opt-out of religious instruction is made, the Catholic Schools Partnership (CSP) recommended for the child to remain in the classroom, participating in what they described as “an interesting, educationally appropriate and child-friendly activity, where alternative supervision is not feasible” (2015, p. 26). This option was viewed as a satisfactory situation for teachers and parents (CSP, 2015). Coolahan et al. noted however, that “this perspective does not illustrate sufficient understanding of the human rights issues involved and an urgent need for opt-out arrangements to be dealt with more satisfactorily in schools.” (2012, p. 82). Addressing those children in Catholic schools whose parents identify with a minority faith or no religious belief, the CSP highlighted the inclusive nature of schools, stating that all traditions are acknowledged, respected and welcomed (CSP, 2015). The CSP stated that “children from all faith traditions and none are welcome to participate in the religious education programme that the school provides” (2015, p. 25).

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research method and the interpretivist paradigm were to guide this research.. The research. The interpretive paradigm allows researchers to view the world through the perceptions and experiences of the participants and uses those experiences to construct and interpret their understanding from gathered data (Creswell, 1994; Thanh & Thanh, 2015). The qualitative approach suited the purpose of this study as it sought to gain a more nuanced understanding of the experiences, challenges and perspectives of school

While teachers, parents and children’s experiences were also considered for inclusion in the research, it was determined that principals should be the focus for two reasons; they are the leaders and decision-makers in their respective schools and teachers, children and parents look to them for guidance and instruction (Fullan, 2006). In order to establish how many children were opted-out of religious instruction and sacramental preparation in their schools, principals would need to inspect their enrolment forms and consult with teachers prior to interview. It was therefore decided to forward the list of questions prior to the interview to ensure that principals had the relevant information they needed in order to answer them accurately and that the data collected was valid (Denscombe, 2014). In order to establish current school practices for children who have been opted-out, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the nine principals. To interpret the qualitative data gathered, Denscombe’s (2014) five stages were implemented in the analysis of qualitative data to ensure credibility: preparation of the data, familiarity with the data, interpreting the data, verifying the data and representing the data.

As both deputy principal and primary school teacher in a Catholic school, the term ‘insider researcher’ can be used to describe the author’s role in this study. An insider researcher offers many advantages, as there can be an implicit assumption from participants that the researcher shares their views and experiences and is therefore more disposed towards engaging in dialogue about their experiences (Unluer, 2012). Although there are numerous benefits to research being conducted by an insider, it can raise concerns relating to objectivity and bias (Smyth & Holian, 2008). As a qualitative approach was used, the size and scale of the study is a limitation. Although the research involved nine principals from a diverse school sample it is not appropriate or accurate to extend the findings to represent all primary Catholic schools in Ireland. However, as each school was selected due to their particular diversity, school type and location, the findings should still be of interest to schools not involved in the study as they are likely to mirror their own context in some way.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

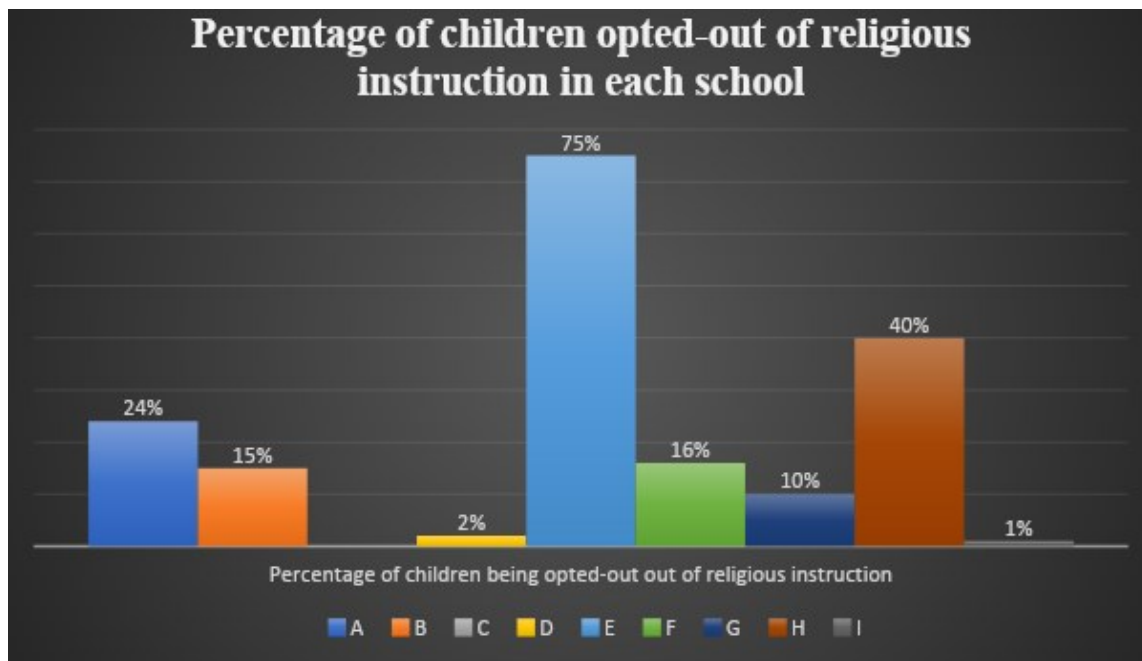


Figure 1: The percentage of children opted-out of religious instruction in each school

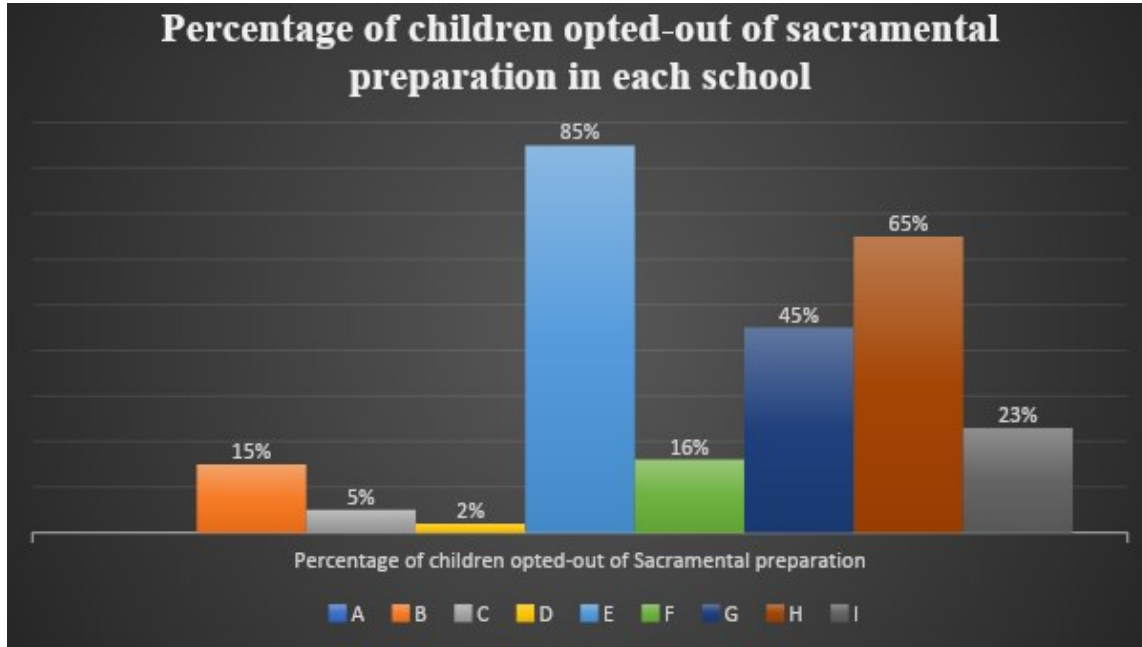


Figure 2: The percentage of children opted-out of sacramental preparation in each school

All percentages are based on the total number of children in each school. School A is omitted from Figure 2 as there is no sacramental preparation in the school as it is a junior school. The data shows that in most of the schools included in the study there are significant numbers of children opted-out of religious instruction and sacramental preparation. For this article five broad themes will be discussed from the interviews:

Significant numbers of children are being opted-out of religious instruction and sacramental preparation in the schools

As can be seen in the graphs above, the percentage of children opted-out of religious instruction varies greatly from school to school. School I has just one per cent, school A has 24 per cent while school E currently has 75 per cent of their enrolment opted-out of religious instruction. School C is the only school that currently has no children opted-out of religious instruction that the principal is aware of. In schools B, D and F, the percentage of children opted-out of sacramental preparation is the same as it is for religious instruction. Of the remaining five schools, each one has more children opted-out of sacramental preparation in addition to those already opted-out of religious instruction. Also, in all of the schools those numbers are either remaining relatively the same or increasing. A number of the principals commented that they had experienced an increase in parents opting their children out over the past five to ten years. This can be attributed to both inward migration and Ireland becoming a more secular society. The estimate for net inward migration is 190,333 between 2016 and 2022 (CSO, 2022). According to statistics from the CSO (2016), there has been a seven fold increase in the number of people identifying as having no religious belief since 1991.

Children opted-out of religious instruction are remaining in the classroom in all schools

The schools selected differed in many ways in terms of school type, size, geographical location and diversity. However, there was a commonality in their approaches to catering for children opted-out of religious instruction. In all nine schools the children remained in the classroom. Also, no parent had requested for their child to be physically removed from the classroom in any of the schools. What those children did during the religious instruction lessons was also similar; children who had been opted-out remain in the classroom either listening, participating in the lesson or doing work.

It is generally accepted that sacramental preparation takes up more time of the school day than religious instruction lessons (Irish National Teachers Organisation, 2013) and permeates throughout the curriculum. The provisions in the majority of the nine schools for those opted-out of sacramental preparation were generally the same, with the children remaining in the classroom. During church visits for sacramental preparation practice a mixture of children going with the class, or remaining behind with a resource teacher was reported.

Principals were ambivalent

All nine principals, despite some having very high numbers of children opted-out, responded that it wasn't a significant issue or challenge for their schools. Several principals expressed ambivalence or indifference towards the issue. Statements such as "go with the flow" and "it's no big deal" were common.

There is a lack of formal procedures and provisions in the schools for children who have been opted-out and teachers are primarily responsible for the arrangements for children who have been opted-out

None of the schools currently have formal procedures or provisions for those children opted-out. The principals in all schools deferred the responsibility to classroom teachers to decide on the arrangements. All principals expressed satisfaction with this approach. The new Admissions to School Education Act (2018) has instructed schools to have in place suitable arrangements for those children opted-out. Generally during religious instruction and sacramental preparation lessons, those children opted-out either did specific work or activities assigned by the teacher, or participated and listened in on the lessons. All principals responded that generally, parents, teachers and children were all satisfied with this approach.

Resource/SE teachers are being used to supervise children who have been opted-out

A common practice emerged from the interviews involving the use of resource/special education teachers. During Church visits, or for children who had been separated for sacramental preparation, these resource/SE teachers supervised the children in many of the schools. This was done despite some principals being unsure whether the children had access to resource hours. This raises concerns about the appropriate use of resource teachers' time and the likelihood that children that have access to resource hours may not be receiving them. According to the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) the role of the resource/SE teacher does not include the supervision of pupils who have been opted out of religious classes.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from this study that the issue of the 'opt-out' clause in Irish primary schools is an extremely complex one. We need only to look at the enormous number of submissions from stakeholders, interest groups and individuals to the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism to get a glimpse of the complexity of the issues surrounding the role of religion and religious education in Irish primary schools.

The findings illustrate that significant numbers of children are opted-out of religious instruction in most of the schools. The numbers of children opted-out also increases again for sacramental preparation in most schools. The provisions and arrangements taken to cater for those children are the same; they all remain in the classroom. Generally, the classroom teacher has primary responsibility for what arrangements are made for those children during this time. The children do other work or activities, or voluntarily listen in and participate with aspects of the lesson. As discussed earlier, this raises several concerns regarding the right of the child to 'not attend' or to be physically removed from the classroom in line with constitutional and human rights law.

Based on the schools involved in this study, this does not appear to be an issue for either the principals or the parents. Parents are generally not raising concerns about their child remaining in the room, or what happens to them during religious instruction lessons.

There have already been several recommendations and suggestions made by the State, the Department of Education, the FOPP and the Catholic Church concerning the future role of religious instruction and sacramental preparation in Irish primary schools. These include sacramental preparation taking place outside of school hours, a new ERB and Ethics curriculum, religious instruction to take place at certain times of the school day, more school divestment and the establishment of multi-denominational and non-denominational schooling alternatives for parents. (FOPP, 2014; CSP, 2015). All of these recommendations have encountered significant challenges to their implementation or have not begun to be implemented at all. This can be attributed to a myriad of factors, including ambivalence on the part of parents and schools as well as a reluctance from the Catholic Church to change the status quo. While it is clear schools are in breach of constitutional and human rights law, it does not appear to be causing concern for either the principals or the parents in the schools included in this study.

Bearing in mind the complexity of the issue, three recommendations are offered from this study:

- A pilot programme to be introduced in schools with significant religious diversity where sacramental preparation moves to a more parish-based approach
- A pilot programme of 'opting-in' to religious instruction in large schools with significant religious diversity
- An ERB and Ethics programme as an *alternative to religious instruction lessons*

There is a clear lack of empirical research on the provision of religious instruction in Irish schools and the implications for minority students. A much deeper investigation of how many children are opted-out and how schools are catering for them is recommended, particularly in major towns, cities and urban areas, where the greatest diversity exists. A more expansive investigation of the perspectives and experiences of principals is also recommended, focusing primarily on inner city and urban areas with high diversity. Further research is needed on the experiences and views of children opted-out of religious instruction by their parents. Their voices are important and should be documented. Research on the views and opinions of parents is also recommended.

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