



Religions and beliefs in changing times: perspectives of student stakeholders in third-level educational contexts in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland

Patricia Kieran, Marie Parker-Jenkins & Anne Ryan

To cite this article: Patricia Kieran, Marie Parker-Jenkins & Anne Ryan (2022) Religions and beliefs in changing times: perspectives of student stakeholders in third-level educational contexts in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, British Journal of Religious Education, 44:1, 38-52, DOI: [10.1080/01416200.2020.1775552](https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2020.1775552)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2020.1775552>



Published online: 10 Jun 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 424



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)



Religions and beliefs in changing times: perspectives of student stakeholders in third-level educational contexts in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland

Patricia Kieran^a, Marie Parker-Jenkins^b and Anne Ryan^c

^aLearning, Society & Religious Education, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, Ireland; ^bSchool of Education, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland; ^cLearning Enhancement & Academic Development, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, Ireland

ABSTRACT

Religions and beliefs are complex, contested and challenging aspects of the educational systems and cultural landscapes both in the Republic of Ireland (ROI) and in Northern Ireland (NI); part of a long and protracted history of colonial oppression and political struggles underpinned by religious and ethnic divisions. The deficit in the literature on third-level students' attitudes to religion and belief in the ROI and NI was a springboard to this multi-disciplinary funded research. Perspectives of 900 second-year university initial teacher education (ITE) and social science students, from 6 tertiary educational contexts were explored within an analytical framework provided by the European Values Survey and the European Social Survey for understanding values and beliefs among its citizenry. The research was undertaken to understand students' attitudes to a belief diverse society involving newly arrived immigrant and refugee groups. The authors argue that based on the research findings key issues such as religious or belief bias, and fear of religious or belief other, emerge for student stakeholders which will inform their professional practice(s). Research of this nature is particularly important in the context of Ireland (ROI and NI) where religious diversity has underpinned political turmoil and educational and cultural division in the past.

KEYWORDS

Third-level; student perspective; religion; belief; diversity; Ireland; bias

Introduction

This research explores the views of third-level students on religious and belief diversity in the Republic of Ireland (ROI) and Northern Ireland (NI). At a time of growing intolerance and hate crime and speech in an increasingly polarised society which challenges the ideology of inter-culturalism (DES 2005 & DES 2006; Council of Europe 2007, Council of Europe 2008), the study set out to explore tertiary (second-year ITE and social science) students' perspectives on the island of Ireland. A lacuna in the literature on tertiary students' awareness and perceptions of religious and belief diversity across the island of Ireland gave impetus to the research. The perspectives of student stakeholders in six third-level institutions, their own religious and belief perspectives and awareness of religious and belief diversity in ROI and NI and its implications for their professional practice(s) was the focus for this mixed methods research. This research is particularly significant because of the historically contentious and contested nature of religious and belief diversity in the island of Ireland exemplified by sectarianism, intolerance,

CONTACT Patricia Kieran ✉ Patricia.Kieran@mic.ul.ie 📧 Learning, Society & Religious Education, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, Ireland

This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

discrimination and the backdrop of the 'troubles' (Coll 2013). The interdisciplinary team of researchers* were particularly interested in the area of religions and beliefs as a consequence of recent shifts in the educational landscape (DES 2011; Coolahan, Hussey, and Kilfeather 2012; Mc Guinness 2012; NCCA 2015; O'Connell 2017) and the research enabled an exploration of social trends and an understanding of student awareness of their own and other peoples' religious and belief identities.

The originality of the project lies in the fact that while there are a number of studies exploring students' attitudes to religious diversity at primary (Fass, Darmody & Sokolowska 2016, Lodge and Lynch 2005; INTO 2003) and post-primary level (Anderson, Byrne, and Cullen 2016; Byrne and Francis 2019; Francis, Croft, and Robbins 2012; Mawhinney et al. 2013) in both ROI and NI and at European level (Aslan, Ebrahim, and Hermansen 2016; ESRI & UCD 2011; Jackson 2011), little research has been carried out on the island of Ireland at tertiary level. Furthermore the involvement of religious bodies in both the ROI and NI's educational system, particularly at primary and post-primary level (Fischer 2016; Francis et al. 2016; Inglis 2007; Williams 2005) where the overwhelming majority of schools are denominational in ROI (Francis et al. 2016; Mawhinney 2015a, 2015b, Mawhinney et al. 2012a), means that third-level ITE and social science students' perspectives on religious and belief diversity are of particular interest.

Research context

Irish demographic trends suggest increasing religious diversity and a move towards secularism (Census ROI 2016; NINIS 2011). Equality legislation, the changing values in the *European Values Survey* (EVS 1981–2008) and the *European Social Survey* (ESS 2002–2018), and the *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism* (2011–2012) has stimulated public debate about the role of religions in schools (Darmody, Smyth, and Mc Coy 2012; O'Donnell 2016; Tuohy 2013). In ROI the Higher Education Authority (HEA) *Review of Chaplaincy* questioned the appropriateness of Ireland's predominantly Catholic chaplaincy services at tertiary level, stating that a similar level of support was unavailable to students from other religious or non-religious traditions (HEA 2016). Further, between 2011 and 2016, the ROI experienced a 73.6% rise in the number of those who ticked the 'No Religion' Census box, with 16.9% not stating a religion or ticking the no religion box in NI (NINIS 2011).

Within a broader human rights framework, the preamble of the EU's first Constitution states that it draws inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, from which have developed the 'universal values of the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person, democracy, equality, freedom and the rule of law'. Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Article 10 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, protects freedom of religion or belief. Freedom of religion or belief is one of the rights listed in Articles 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Freedom of religion or belief involves two inter-related but separate dimensions. Firstly the freedom to choose to have or not to have, or to change or not to change, religion or belief. Secondly the freedom to practise or manifest religion or belief, as an individual or as a member of a community in public or private, by worship, teaching and practice.

In ROI and NI there is no universally accepted definition (Hermisson, Gochyyev, and Wilson 2019) of the multiplicity of terms (religion, belief, worldview, conviction, faith etc.) and the multivalent meanings attributed to the complex and contested language used in discussion of religion and belief (Jackson 2014). The terms religion and belief were used in this research because of their usage by the DES in Ireland (Coolahan, Hussey, and Kilfeather 2012, DES Junior Cycle Framework) as well as in European Policy initiatives (Keast 2007; OSCE 2007, REDCo). Within the discipline of Religious Education belief is a complex and contested term (Davanev and Laderman 2005) which can be used in a range of contexts with a range of different emphases and meanings. In this article the term belief is being used in accordance with Toledo (OSCE 2007, 42) to describe non-religious worldviews.

Theoretical underpinning

The research draws on the theoretical work of ‘critical multiculturalism’ (Kincheloe and Steinberg 1997) and the structure and processes informing educational provision which seeks to integrate children of different religions and beliefs. An increase in *Far Right* politics across Europe; hostility towards those who are different in Ireland (Breen, Devereux, and Haynes 2008; Breen, Haynes, and Devereux 2005; Carr 2016; Fanning 2012); and a backlash in many countries to recent migration trends (UN Refugee Agency 2015) form the literature base for this study. The debates internationally across nations have shifted from issues of equality and social inclusion (Edwards, Armstrong, and Miller 2001; Madood 2010), to that of anti-terrorism and hate speech/crime (Carr 2016; Gearon 2017; Jackson 2015; O’Donnell 2016). Intolerance towards ‘difference’ is increasing (Kieran 2019; Parker-Jenkins, Glenn, and Janmaat 2014), due in part to the recent flow of migrants entering Europe, and the aftermath of the Brexit vote and the Trump election. However, educational institutions are seen as spaces for welcoming newcomers, supporting inclusion and challenging racist and xenophobic behaviour.

At national level, a number of key policy documents and current scholarly publications helped inform the project (Coolahan, Hussey, and Kilfeather 2012; Gallagher 2016; HEA 2013, 2016; NCCA 2015). Byrne and Francis’ comparative work (2019) exploring the attitudes of teenagers and young people on the island of Ireland to religion and diversity was particularly useful. Their analysis of data gathered over a fifty-year period in NI and ROI, and in particular the more recent data gathered through the Religious Diversity and Young People Survey (Byrne and Francis 2019; Francis et al. 2016) enabled the researchers to access what young people were saying about their experience and understanding of diverse religious and non-religious traditions. Finally, MacGreil’s work (2011) was pertinent in providing guidance for this innovative study. The research was informed by international research on religion in education (Weisse 2010), religious diversity and intercultural education (Keast 2007) as well as the Toledo Guiding Principles which state that educators must be open to engaging with and learning about diverse religions and beliefs (OSCE 2007, 14).

Research methods

This mixed methods study combined both quantitative (Teo 2013) and qualitative (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2015; Creswell and Clark 2018) methods to elicit third-level student perspectives. It involved investigation into 900 third-level students’ descriptions of their own religious or belief affiliation as well as their awareness and perceptions of religions and beliefs in the ROI and NI context.

The research methodology and the modes of data collection through on-line survey and focus group was informed by robust protocols for data collection utilised by the European Values Survey and the European Social Survey. The research design built upon the ‘European Values Survey’ research instruments and data base (EVS 1981–2008, ESS 2002–2014), a large-scale, cross-national and longitudinal survey, which is widely used across more than 47 European countries for its rigour and ethical underpinnings. The European Social Survey is a pan-European, replicable and reputable framework for analysing and understanding the behaviours, opinions, values, and beliefs of Europe’s citizens (Breen 2017). A mixed methods approach involving focus groups as well as internet-based Survey Monkey was utilised. Religion is an enduring long-term theme in the ESS and the ESS data provided a unique insight into changing trends in religious practice and secularisation across the island of Ireland (ESS 2014). Survey design was influenced by the socio-demographic profile section of the ESS which includes age, religion and education of respondent. Several key questions which appeared in successive phases of the ESS were adapted and incorporated into the survey design for this research.

The research involved five stages:

- (1) Literature review of Religions and Beliefs in Ireland (2010–2019), including the researching of sensitive issues (Denham 2001), and approaches which provide for confidentiality, anonymity;

- (2) Research instrument consisting of an anonymous on-line confidential survey with selected questions and scales from the EVS/ESS. The questionnaire was designed using the anonymous, secure survey package Survey Monkey;
- (3) Two self-selecting focus groups in each of the 6 institutions and ongoing data analysis. Debriefing opportunities were offered to all survey and focus group participants;
- (4) Consultation and discussion of emerging findings with expert critical friends on the international expert steering group to uphold the highest of ethical standards given the sensitive and complex nature of the topic;
- (5) Dissemination of findings and recommendations through final report, feedback workshops for staff and students and scholarly output.

The on-line survey was piloted and took 10–15 minutes to complete. The first section contained a range of questions focusing on participants' age, gender, university programme, and personal religion or belief affiliation and practice (Q. 1–14). The second section explored student perceptions of whether people in ROI or NI are welcoming to religiously or belief diverse communities as well as students' personal level of curiosity, comfort with and understanding of religion and belief diversity (Q. 15–26). A Likert scale of 1–5 was used to gauge participants' perceptions with a comments box after each section. The final survey section contained questions related to whether students perceived religious and belief diversity as relevant to their future professional practice and third-level course (Q. 27–32).

Research participants

The participants in this research project were 900 ITE and social science students from a variety of secular and religious tertiary institutions in ROI and NI including: University of Limerick (ROI); Mary Immaculate College (ROI); Limerick Institute of Technology (ROI); Stranmillis University College (NI); St. Mary's University College (NI) and Ulster University (NI).

The focus of the research was not on students' perceptions related to their affiliation to either a religious or secular institution, but their perceptions as tertiary student stakeholders and future practitioners. A key aspect of the research involved institutional anonymity in addition to student anonymity, to protect the religious and philosophical character of the collaborating research institutions as well as participants from minority religious and belief traditions. In each institution students were informed of research aims and invited to participate as voluntary, anonymous participants with ongoing right to withdraw. Within collaborating institutions, designated academics acted as gatekeepers for the research. Importantly in addition to ethical clearance, institutional approval was sought and gained before the research was undertaken.

Results

The research subject demographics show that all participants were HEA second-year full-time students where 92% were 18–24 years old with 7% 25–34 years old with 1% over 34. Relative to 10% national statistics for mature undergraduate entrants at University Sector in ROI, and 14% at Institute of Technology sector (HEA 2015–2016), mature students are under-represented in this research sample.

An open question 'What is your sex/gender identity?' invited students to self-describe. Seventy eight per cent of participants responded 'female' while 21.5% responded 'male'. The remaining 0.5% self-described with variations of 'I do not identify as male or female' or 'non-binary'. The findings are consistent with the gender gap in Irish education for initial teacher education students and teachers. In 2015 in ROI females accounted for 87% of teachers at primary level and in 2011–2012, 68% of teachers were female at post-primary level.

In response to the question 'Do you consider yourself as belonging to any particular religion or denomination?' 79% said 'Yes'. 16% said 'No' and 4.5% 'Don't Know'. 0.5% skipped. The percentage of No respondents (16%) is consistent with the Census data results for the general population in NI where 17% have no religion or do not state a religion. It is worth noting that the research indicates very high levels of religious participation for this age cohort relative to EVS and ESS data for Europe. However it is consistent with other research findings that people in ROI aged between 16–29 rank among the most religious in Europe in terms of prayer and attendance at religious services (Bullivant 2018). The sample group is at odds with a pan-European *Generation What?* online survey finding for young adults (aged 16–29) in the ROI where 80% said they would be happy without a religious belief and recent research that indicates lower levels of religious practice and religiosity (58%) among initial teacher applicants in Ireland (Heinz, Davison, and Keane 2018; Parker-Jenkins and Masterson 2013).

When asked 'Do you consider yourself as belonging to any particular religion or denomination?: 64.75% identified Roman Catholic; 6% Presbyterian; 3.5% Church of Ireland; 3.75% Other Christian denomination; 0.5% Methodist; 0.25% Islamic and 0.5% Other non-Christian Religions. The high percentage of Catholics is consistent with the Census data (78.3% Catholic) for the overall population in ROI (CSO 2016) but not with NI (40.8% in 2011).

Qualitative data from focus groups provided insight into participants' complex understandings of religious identity that suggest a more fluid form of religious identity encompassing personal and cultural belonging without necessarily believing or practicing (Davie 1994, 2015). The focus groups indicated that some saw religious identity as a familial or cultural descriptor (Byrne and Francis 2019). In the words of one participant, many students are not 'big into religion'. One participant explained their complex and paradoxical notion of religious identity.

'... My dad's view of the Catholic religion ... I don't believe in it but it influences me because he's a sweet person. I have more respect for religion because I was born into it not because I believe in it.'

Others remarked:

'I attend Church at Christmas for my parents' ... 'Catholic identity is mixed in with Irishness and I don't really agree with that ... being Irish, Catholic and being drunk all the time is linked with Catholicism in some students' minds.'

Initial data analysis and results indicate a lack of significant religious or belief diversity in the cohort which under-represents the percentage of those other than Catholic recorded for the general population in the relevant Census data (Central Statistics Office 2016). One ITE Focus Group participant noted:

'There is the White Catholic stereotype. Anyone different stands out. Not a lot of people with any disability in the teaching profession because of Health and Safety issues we're told. Kids see people with Physical Disability and think – they can't teach.'

Main findings

Data results focus on religious and belief diversity, perceived discrimination, and attitudes to religious and belief diversity across all six institutions. A survey question gauging students' perceptions of how welcoming people in ROI and NI are to belief diverse groups showed a lack of welcome (Figure 1). While 17% understood the general population to be welcoming or very welcoming, 61.5% considered them somewhat welcoming or extremely unwelcoming.

One participant in a Focus Group commented:

'My aunt converted to Buddhism. My grandmother was crying. My aunt was not allowed to chant in front of others ... Such a beautiful religion. The family were afraid.'

Similarly:

How welcoming are people in ROI/NI to people of diverse religions, beliefs and none?

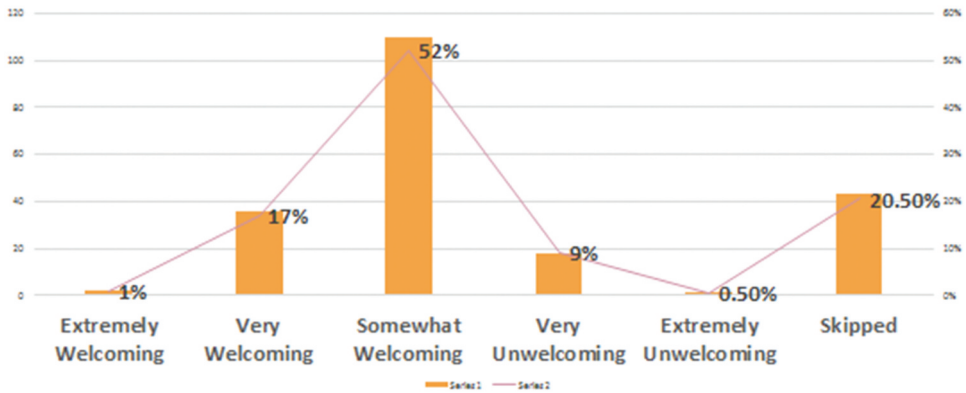


Figure 1. How welcoming are people in ROI/NI to people of diverse religions, beliefs and none.

'A member of a minority belief was almost verbally attacked (because of their religious tradition) on front of their peers in college in a lecture.'

Another noted:

'When people our age are looking for a boyfriend they would say 'I'd stick with my own kind'.

Seventy three point five percent of participants recorded either neutral/disagree or strongly disagree for the statement that discrimination on the basis of religion or belief is rare in ROI and NI (Figure 2). 9% recorded agree/strongly agree in answer to this question. Researchers noted a high percentage of those who skipped this (17.5%) and other qualitative questions. In a survey on ITE students in ROI Heinz also reports a high non-response rate (25%) to open ended questions and speculates that this

Discrimination on the basis of religion or belief is rare in Ireland (North & South).

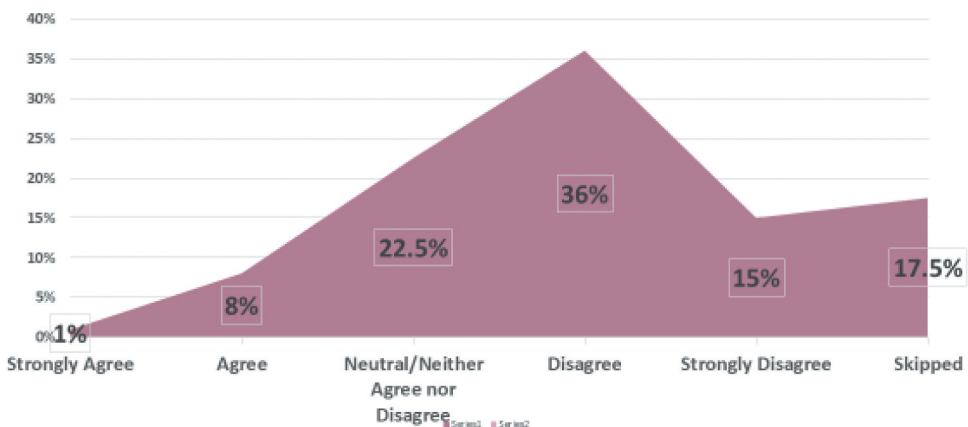


Figure 2. Discrimination on the basis of religion or belief is rare in Ireland (north & south).

might be because participants are reluctant or uncomfortable to disclose their thoughts and attitudes (Heinz, Davison, and Keane 2018; Home Office 2000).

Focus Group participants frequently spoke about discrimination. One said:

'My family are racist but they don't mean it. They are uneducated about it ... Irish people are racist and xenophobic. It is a subtle, invisible racism. They are seemingly friendly but condescending. For example I have witnessed them asking a 25 year old professional woman unusual questions "Are you allowed to travel on your own?" They wouldn't ask another professional woman this of majority culture or faith ... This is heightened by religious difference.'

Fear of Muslims was also identified by participants:

'People I know in a small Irish town have negative things to say about Muslims. People I know are very closed minded and suspicious.'

Using a Likert scale of 1 to 6 participants were asked to indicate whether their third-level Course had informed their understanding of the potential relevance of religions and beliefs for their future professional practice (Figure 3). Five percent said it was not at all informative about such relevance and 4% indicated it was extremely informative about any such relevance.

While education about inclusion and religious and belief diversity is a key aspect of ITE in ROI and NI it is notable that 30.5% of respondents thought their third-level course has not really informed their understanding of its relevance to their future professional practice. One suggested:

'My institution is open minded but there is such pressure for Maths and Science (to learn about and teach) etc. Education about religious and belief diversity slips away and is a lower priority.'

Another stated:

'For teachers who are aware of it (diversity of Religion and Beliefs) it is always on our minds in teaching History/ Geography but I'd say most are not conscious of it.'

When asked how relevant an awareness of different religious traditions and philosophical world-views was to their future professional practice (Figure 4) a number of individual focus group participants could see a clear link between their awareness of religious and belief diversity and their future professional practice.

To what extent has your current Third Level course informed your understanding of the potential relevance of religions and beliefs for your future professional practice? (1 Not at All to 6 Extremely)

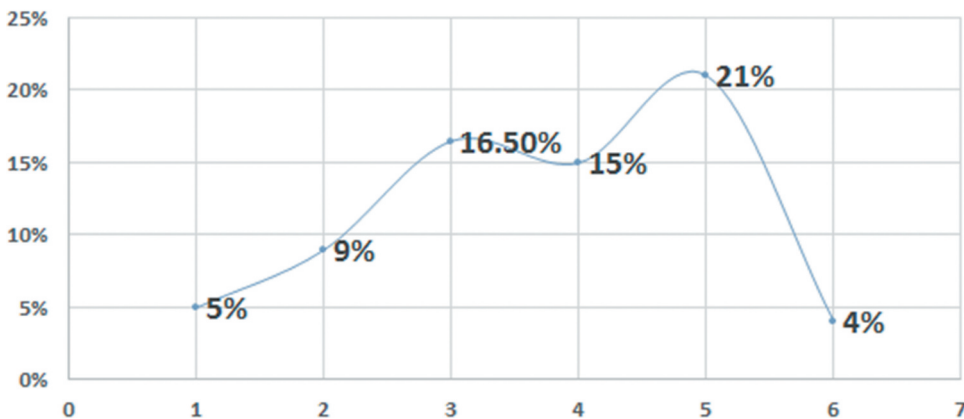


Figure 3. To what extent has your current third level course informed your understanding of the potential relevance of religions and beliefs for your future professional practice? (1 Not at all to 6 extremely).

How relevant is an awareness of different religious traditions and philosophical worldviews to your future professional practice?

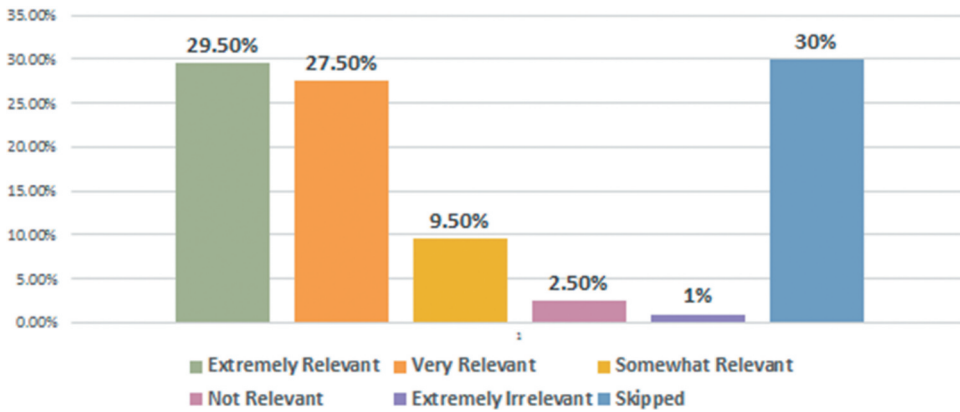


Figure 4. How relevant is an awareness of different religious traditions and philosophical worldviews to your future professional practice?

One recalled:

There was a Sikh child in school – a boy (because of uncut hair – Kesh- kept in a rumal on top of his head) who was mistaken for a female by other kids ... if kids know about religious diversity they can be more respectful. This kid was wearing a bracelet. I didn't want to prod the kid with millions of questions. These are wonderful people. So interesting. We need to know much more.'

Thirty seven per cent disagree with the statement that increased religious diversity is seen as a potential security threat in ROI and NI (Figure 5). On the other hand, 14% of respondents agreed or

Increased religious diversity in ROI/NI is a potential security threat.

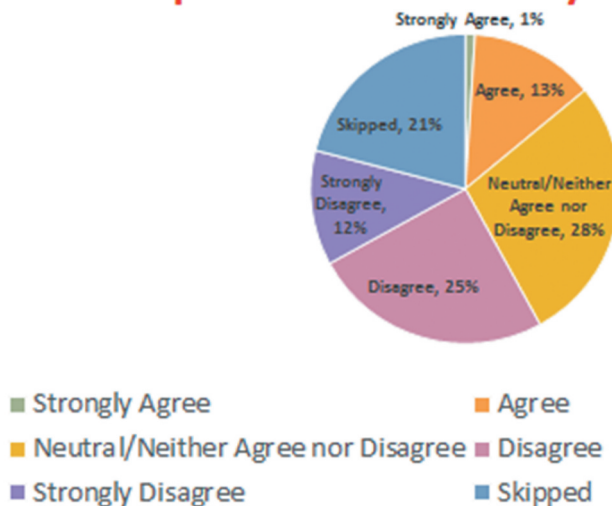


Figure 5. Increased religious diversity in ROI/NI is a potential security threat.

strongly agreed that increased religious diversity is a security threat. When those who agreed or strongly agreed are combined with the neutral category this gives a total of 42%. Given that all of the research participants were ITE and social science students this is a significant issue that raises questions about the securitisation of religion as evidenced by the Prevent strategy in the UK (Gearon 2013, 2017; O'Donnell 2016).

Qualitative data from the focus groups indicates that individual participants were aware of the complexity of religious and belief traditions and identities as well as media and popular misrepresentations of them. A participant suggested:

'Knowledge prevents fear. It's like the media presents a distorted image of Muslims. People mix culture up with religion.'

Focus Group participants exhibited openness and curiosity to religious and belief diversity. One stated 'Religions and Beliefs are relevant to my life' and another 'I love chatting about life and death and do this really deeply with friends from different faith communities.'

Discussion

This third-level stakeholder group served as a microcosmic representation of the wider community, providing an important insight into current thinking by future practitioners. Themes from focus groups included curiosity, openness, fear, racism, respect and bias. Self-selecting students voluntarily participated in focus groups and tended to exhibit high levels of interest in religious and belief diversity as well as comfort and confidence in exploring their perspectives in a group context.

Research shows that classrooms in ROI are ethnically, culturally, belief and gender diverse at primary level. However, '98% of trainee teachers claim Irish nationality, more than 95% are 'white Irish' (Heinz, Davison, and Keane 2018), and many are 'middle-class women' (Irish Times, 18 September 2017). The lack of religious or belief diversity among the research participants and the underrepresentation of males in the data set means that, despite their interest in religious and belief diversity, such diversity in the general population is under-represented here. The results, however, do highlight the impact that the rapidly changing topography of religions and beliefs in the ROI and NI (Bråten 2014) is having on future educators and how they view their professional practice.

The issue of 'fear'

The data suggests that religion and belief are sensitive topics, defying neat categorisation and influencing participants' sense of identity and belonging. A key theme was students' perception of a link between religions and belief on the one hand and fear and discrimination on the other. Participants resisted an uncontested or universal-communitarian notion of religious or belief identity. A participant noted:

'There is aggression when someone has no faith. Aggression around religion. People need to calm down. A lot of language needs to be more neutral. There is lots of "we" language.'

Another observed 'The fear of educators is that if they're teaching other religions they'll lose faith in their own.' This notion of fear was expressed around a variety of aspects of religious and belief traditions, with repeated references to Islam (Carr 2016). Students spoke of the tendency for people to stick to familiar traditions (Hermisson, Gochyev, and Wilson 2019). One participant noted that she had:

'... a friend in Secondary school who is afraid to wear Henna and to wear Hijab to express her religion. Spiritual emblems – she's afraid to express herself.'

The issue of 'bias'

Another issue from focus groups suggested that students perceived religions and beliefs to be in some sense related to bias at personal, educational, institutional, resource, systemic and national levels. The research findings suggest that participants' were very conscious of lecturers' beliefs. Students explicitly used the term 'bias' and stated that at times they felt forced to conceal or change their religious or belief perspective in third-level lectures or assessments to conform with the religious view or beliefs of lecturers in order to gain a good grade. Student perception of religious or belief bias as part of the educational system was a significant recurring theme. Indeed the data suggested that student beliefs were connected with lecturers' beliefs. Students gave examples of incidents where lecturers commented openly and sometimes negatively, in a lecture or seminar setting, often in an academic discipline unrelated to religions or beliefs, on something related to students' own religious or belief worldviews. The results indicate the need for expression and discussion of religion and belief in third-level contexts in a manner that does not fuel conflict. Importantly, this needs to be conducted through pedagogical practices providing safe learning environments (O'Donnell et al. 2019).

One participant cited an incident in a third-level lecture/tutorial where they disclosed as part of a general discussion that they belonged to a specific religious tradition. The lecturer responded:

'The reason I don't like your religion (and they named it) is because of the way it treats x, y, z ...'

The participant reported they felt publically humiliated and vulnerable and their peers were shocked as well. However, the participant also said:

'I am afraid to complain about mistreatment from staff in my third-level College. I tell everyone about my negative experience and don't make an official complaint because it will prejudicially affect my grades ... emotionally I've felt hard done by. People have sometimes been very unhelpful. I'm upset and do not feel I can deal with this. It's very upsetting.'

Further student perception of diverse forms of bias (Mc Garry, 2017) relating to religions and beliefs emerged in open-ended focus group discussion relating to different aspects of the third-level and wider educational context. One participant noted:

'Even in College it (the academic study of religion) seems biased ... all readings given are completely one-sided and we must cite these.'

Another ITE student reflected on their experiences of teaching religion in the classroom in a denominational school during school placement:

'Regardless of what you believe in you are trying to make the kids believe in something you don't believe in. I don't believe this ... I wouldn't feel comfortable lying to the children. It's very frustrating. I didn't realise how much religion would be here.'

The overlap between religion and education in the ROI and NI at all levels was a recurring theme. A participant stated:

'My friend is a primary teacher and decided not to teach RE (in a faith school). During RE class my friend just teaches another curricular area. A professional from the faith community came into her class and gave out to her. This other professional was trying to convert the kids and teacher ... my friend was nailed to the ground because of her beliefs and the other professional belittled her in front of the kids.'

The rise in religious diversity in ROI and NI has brought challenges and opportunities for educators and the findings concur with research suggesting that tensions and anxiety arises when the right to religious practice is perceived to impinge upon the freedom of others (Arweck and Shipley 2016). While there were high levels of religious self-identification (79%) and low levels of religious diversity among the research sample, students showed awareness of high levels of discrimination and lack of welcome for diversity. In this context the relevance of education and dialogue about religions and beliefs for their future professional practice is key. The research shows that the tertiary educational

context is changing rapidly. Students highlighted fissures in the relationship between the changing demographics within society and the existing educational systems (Bråten 2014). Students are curious and open to learning more about religious and belief diversity in third-level but they feel that a range of interest groups are fearful of anything that might change the status quo. One participant reflected:

'The government and college don't want us to purposely learn about it (religious & belief diversity). The government does not want to take full responsibility for education in Ireland (ROI). 84% of schools (sic.) are owned by the Church and not by the government. That's ridiculous! We don't even have our own education system.'

In another Focus Group the issue of bias emerged as one participant noted:

'Even in the library most of the books are biased. Only 3 or 4 books are negative (about religious influence in education).'

Importantly, this suggests that some students are aware of library stock relating to religion and belief. Others reported that they were disadvantaged because lecturers tended to order books for the library in keeping with their own biases. Parker Palmer in *The Courage to Teach* argues that we teach who we are (Palmer 1998). Within an educational context this has implications for privileges and beliefs that teachers have as the dominant social class, gender, nationality, ethnic, religious or belief group (Devine 2011a, Heinz, Davison, and Keane 2018; McGarry 2017; Parker-Jenkins and Masterson 2013). The research findings indicate that religions and beliefs manifest themselves across a variety of disciplines in a tertiary context, sometimes in ways that create friction. Educators and learners' personal religious and belief perspectives are not hermetically separated from their academic lives. The power imbalance between educator and learner sometimes means that students who perceive that their beliefs have been misrepresented or trivialised, may not have the courage to speak or the vocabulary to express their critique or resistance to the dominant narrative in the educational context. They fear that apart from peer ostracisation, if they challenge the status quo it may impact negatively on their grades.

The main findings of this research suggest that there is a significant lack of understanding about and sometimes a real insensitivity around religion and belief in third-level contexts in ROI and NI. Students exhibited awareness of a high degree of discrimination and a level of hostility to the religious or belief 'other'. Atheists, Buddhists, Christians and Muslims, among others, were cited as perceived targets of discrimination in this research. The research suggests that there should be far greater sensitivity to students' religious and belief traditions at tertiary level, as well as to the debilitating impact that a perceived power imbalance between lecturer and student can have in inhibiting students from addressing any perceived discrimination in the area of religions and beliefs. While Toledo focused on Public Schools in Europe, this research shows the potentially positive benefits of dialogue and teaching about religions and beliefs to reduce fear, bias, harmful misunderstandings and stereotypes at tertiary level (OSCE 2007). This research suggests that greater dialogue and education about religions and belief could help to promote more cohesive and respectful learning contexts at tertiary level. This is entirely in keeping with REDCo's findings that within Europe, there needs to be dialogue and discussion about and between different religions and beliefs (Weisse 2010). The themes of discrimination, fear and bias in this research exhibit how the complex relationship between new social patterns and old structures (Bråten 2014) is being challenged due to the changing demographics in Ireland (Breen and Healy 2016; Devine 2011b; Grenham and Kieran 2012; Ziebertz and Kay 2009). At tertiary level as the educational landscape changes, the delicate balance between academic freedom and freedom of religion and beliefs creates new tensions but also new opportunities. The researchers suggest that in a climate where discrimination and fear concerning religions and beliefs is not uncommon, third-level colleges have an ideal opportunity to lead the way. They might begin to facilitate formal and informal learning and dialogue about

religious and belief diversity in a manner that is open, creative and respectful and that contributes to the flourishing of society and the academy.

Conclusion

The research uncovered high levels of religious self-identification among students (79%) and an overwhelmingly positive attitude to religious diversity in society. Yet the research also uncovered a series of tensions relating to unwelcoming attitudes, discrimination, fear of the religious or belief other as well as the issue of religious or belief bias in third-level educational contexts. This research is apposite in the current climate (Breen and Healy 2016; Coakley 2012) and has implications for how educators respond to 'difference' in terms of policy impact and professional practice(s). It reflects the findings of European research (Toledo, REDCo) concerning the important role that education about diversity of religions and beliefs has to play, not only at preschool, primary or secondary level but also at tertiary level as part of a general education (Council of Europe 2008; OSCE 2007).

*This article is based on research carried out in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The authors wish to acknowledge the scholarship and support of all the members of the research team: Dr. Norman Richardson (Stranmillis University College), Dr. Aideen Hunter (Ulster University) and Dr. Niall Coll (St. Mary's College University Belfast).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the National Institute for Studies in Education (NISE) [€4,000]; National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning [€1,000]; Standing Conference on Teacher Education, North and South (SCoTENS) [£5,000].

Notes on contributors

Patricia Kieran teaches Religious Education at Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Ireland. She is Director of the Irish Institute for Catholic Studies. She has co-written and edited books on a range of topics including Catholic theology, Religious Education in an Intercultural Europe, Children and Catholicism & Trends and Challenges in Education. Her most recent book *Connecting Lives: Inter-belief Dialogue in Contemporary Ireland* (2019) focuses on dialogue among belief diverse communities.

Marie Parker-Jenkins is Professor Emerita in the School of Education University of Limerick. She has taught in seven universities in three countries, and the overall theme of her research is that of Social Justice, drawing on human rights law, issues of ethnicity and school leadership which she has disseminated in over 100 books, articles, conference papers and through the media.

Anne Ryan is an Academic Developer and Lecturer in Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick. Her research is on student beliefs and values, including religious values, how student beliefs impact learning and student beliefs on personal finance. Anne's previous research included developing Psychological Capital and resilience in the student to support learning.

References

- Anderson, B., G. Byrne, and S. Cullen. 2016. "Religious Pluralism, Education and Citizenship in Ireland." In *Islam, Religions and Pluralism in Europe*, edited by E. Aslan, R. Ebrahim, and M. Hermansen, 161–172. Berlin: Springer.
- Arweck, E., and H. Shipley, eds. 2016. *Young People's Attitudes to Religious Diversity*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Aslan, E., R. Ebrahim, and M. Hermansen, eds. 2016. *Islam, Religions, and Pluralism in Europe*. Berlin: Springer.

- Bråten, O. M. H. 2014. "New Social Patterns: Old Structures? How the Countries of Western Europe Deal with Religious Plurality in Education." In *Religious Education at Schools in Europe*, edited by M. Rothgangel, R. Jackson, and M. Jäggle, 287–313. Göttingen: V&R Unipress.
- Breen, M. J., E. Devereux, and A. Haynes. 2008. "Public Exercises in Othring: Irish Print Media Coverage of Asylum Seekers and Refugees." In *Facing the Other: Interdisciplinary Studies on Race, Gender and Social Justice in Ireland*, edited by B. Farago and M. O'Sullivan, 162–181. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press.
- Breen, M. J., ed. 2017. *Values and Identities in Europe: Evidence for the European Social Survey*. London: Routledge.
- Breen, M. J., A. Haynes, and E. Devereux. 2005. "Smuggling Zebras for Lunch: Media Framing of Asylum Seekers in the Irish Print Media." *Etudes irlandaises* 30 (1): 109–130. Google Scholar. doi:10.3406/irlan.2005.2997.
- Breen, M. J., and A. E. Healy. 2016. *Changing Values, Attitudes and Behaviours in Ireland: An Analysis of European Social Survey Data in Ireland, 2002–2012*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Bullivant, S. 2018. *Europe's Young Adults and Religion Findings from the European Social Survey (2014–16) to Inform the 2018 Synod of Bishops*. Twickenham: St Mary's University.
- Byrne, G., and L. Francis, eds. 2019. *Religion and Education: The Voices of Young People in Ireland*. Dublin: Veritas.
- Carr, J. 2016. *Experiences of Islamophobia: Living with Racism in the Neo-liberal Era*. London: Routledge.
- Central Statistics Office. 2016. *Census Profile 8 Irish Travellers, Ethnicity and Religion*. Dublin: Central Statistics Office.
- Coakley, J. 2012. *Nationalism, Ethnicity and the State: Making and Breaking Nations*. California: Sage Publications.
- Cohen, L., L. Manion, and K. Morrison. 2015. *Research Methods in Education*. New York: Routledge.
- Coll, N. 2013. "Religious Pluralism and Educational Practice in Northern Ireland." In *Toward Mutual Ground: Pluralism, Religious Education and Diversity in Irish Schools*, edited by G. Byrne and P. Kieran, 147–156. Dublin: Columba Press.
- Coolahan, J., C. Hussey, and F. Kilfeather. 2012. "The Forum of Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector". Report of the Forum's Advisory Group. Ireland: Government of Ireland.
- Council of Europe. 2007. *State, Religion, Secularity and Human Rights: Recommendation 1804*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Council of Europe. 2008. *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue: Living Together as Equals in Dignity*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Creswell, J. W., and V. L. Clark. 2018. *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*. California: Sage.
- Darmody, M., E. Smyth, and S. Mc Coy. 2012. *School Sector Variation among Primary Schools in Ireland*. Dublin: ESRI.
- Davanev, S. G., and D. Laderman. 2005. "Introduction: Contesting Religion and Religions Contested: The Study of Religion in a Global Context." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73 (4): 979–985. URL. doi:10.1093/jaarel/fi111.
- Davie, G. 1994. *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging: Making Contemporary Britain*. New London: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Davie, G. 2015. *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox*. London: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Denham, J. 2001. "Building Cohesive Communities: A report of the ministerial group on public order and community cohesion." London: Home Office.
- DES. 2006. *Guidelines for Post-Primary Teachers*. Dublin: Government Publications Office.
- DES. 2011. *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*. Dublin: Government Publications Office.
- DES (Department of Education and Skills). 2005. *Intercultural Education in the Primary School Guidelines for Teachers*. Dublin: Government Publications Office.
- Devine, D. 2011a. *Ethnic Minority Children and Youth in Ireland*. Amsterdam: Springer.
- Devine, D. 2011b. *Immigration and Schooling in the Republic of Ireland - Making a Difference?* Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Edwards, R., P. Armstrong, and N. Miller. 2001. "Include Me Out: Critical Readings of Social Exclusion, Social Inclusion and Lifelong Learning." *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 20: 417–428. doi:10.1080/02601370120116.
- ESRI, and UCD. 2011. "Religion and Schooling in Ireland: Key Informants' Perspectives." In *Religious Education in a Multicultural Society, Perspective*. Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and University College Dublin (UCD), 1–15.
- ESS. 2014. *Round 4: European Social Survey: ESS-4 2008 Documentation Report*. Edition 5.3. ed. Bergen: European Social Survey Data Archive, NSD - Norwegian Centre for Research Data for ESS ERIC.
- Faas, D., Darmody, M., and Sokolowska, B. 2016. "Religious diversity in primary schools: reflections from the Republic of Ireland." *British Journal of Religious Education*. 38(1): 83–98. doi: 10.1080/01416200.2015.1025700
- Fanning, B. 2012. *Racism and Social Change in the Republic of Ireland*. 2nd ed. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Fischer, K. 2016. *Schools and the Politics of Religion and Diversity in the Republic of Ireland: Separate but Equal?* Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Francis, L. J., G. Byrne, B. Sweetman, and G. Penny. 2016. "Growing up Female and Catholic in the Republic of Ireland and in Scotland: The Intersectionality of Religious Identity, Religious Saliency, and Nationality." In *Diversity and Intersectionality: Studies in Religion, Education and Values*, edited by J. Astley and L. J. Francis, 67–99. Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Francis, L. J., A. P. Croft, and M. Robbins. 2012. "Young People's Attitudes to Religious Diversity: Quantitative Approaches from Social Psychology and Empirical Theology." *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 33 (3): 279–292. doi:10.1080/13617672.2012.732808.

- Gallagher, T. 2016. *Shared Education in Northern Ireland: School Collaboration in Divided Societies*. Oxford: Oxford Review of Education.
- Gearon, L. 2013. "The Counter Terrorist Classroom: Religion, Education, and Security." *Religious Education Association* 108 (2): 129–147. doi:10.1080/00344087.2013.767660.
- Gearon, L. 2017. "The Counter-terrorist Campus: Securitisation Theory and University Securitisation – Three Models." *Transformation in Higher Education* 2 (1): 1–9. doi:10.4102/the.v2i0.13.
- Grenham, T. G., and P. Kieran, ed. 2012. *New Educational Horizons in Contemporary Ireland: Trends and Challenges: Rethinking Education Series*. Vol. 9. Oxford: Peter Lang.
- HEA. 2016. *National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions*. Dublin: Higher Education Authority.
- HEA (Higher Education Authority). 2013. *Report to the Minister of Education and Skills on System Reconfiguration, Inter-institutional Collaboration and System Governance in Irish Higher Education*. Dublin: Higher Education Authority.
- Heinz, M., K. Davison, and E. Keane. 2018. "'I Will Do It but Religion Is a Very Personal Thing': Teacher Education Applicants' Attitudes Towards Teaching Religion in Ireland." *European Journal of Teacher Education* 41 (2): 232–245. doi:10.1080/02619768.2018.1426566.
- Hermisson, S., P. Gochyev, and M. Wilson. 2019. "Assessing Pupils' Attitudes Towards Religious and Worldview Diversity – Development and Validation of a Nuanced Measurement Instrument." *British Journal of Religious Education* 41 (4): 371–387. doi:10.1080/01416200.2018.1556604.
- Home Office. 2000. *Research on Religious Discrimination in England and Wales*. London: Home Office Research Study 220.
- Inglis, T. 2007. "Catholic Identity in Contemporary Ireland: Belief and Belonging to Tradition." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 22 (2): 205–220. doi:10.1080/13537900701331064.
- Irish National Teachers' Organisation. 2003. *Teaching Religion in the Primary School: Issues and Challenges*. Dublin: Irish National Teachers' Organisation.
- Jackson, R. 2011. "The Interpretive Approach as a Research Tool: Inside the REDCo Project." *British Journal of Religious Education* 33 (2): 189–208. doi:10.1080/01416200.2011.543602.
- Jackson, R. 2014. *Signposts: Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-religious World Views in Intercultural Education*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Jackson, R. 2015. "The Politicisation and Securitisation of Religious Education? A Rejoinder." *British Journal of Educational Studies* 63 (3): 345–366. doi:10.1080/00071005.2015.1069257.
- Keast, J. 2007. *Religious Diversity and Intercultural Education: A Reference Book for Schools*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Kieran, P., ed. 2019. *Connecting Voices: Interbelief Dialogue in Contemporary Ireland*. Dublin: Veritas.
- Kincheloe, J., and S. Steinberg. 1997. *Critical Multiculturalism*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Lodge, A., and K. Lynch, eds. 2005. *Diversity at School*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.
- MacGreil, M. 2011. *Pluralism and Diversity in Ireland*. Dublin: Columba Press.
- Madood, T. 2010. "Moderate Secularism, Religion as Identity and Respect for Religion." *The Political Quarterly* 81 (1): 4–14. doi:10.1111/j.1467-923X.2010.02075.X.
- Mawhinney, A. 2012a. "A Discriminating Education System: Religious Admission Policies in Irish Schools and International Human Rights Law." *International Journal of Children's Rights* 20 (4): 603–623. doi:10.1163/157181811X611054.
- Mawhinney, A. 2012b. "Crucifixes, Classrooms and Children: A Semiotic Cocktail." In *The Lautsi Papers: Multidisciplinary Reflections on Religious Symbols in the Public School Classroom*, edited by J. Temperman, 93–111. Leiden: Brill. doi:10.1163/9789004222519.
- Mawhinney, A. 2015a. "International Human Rights Law: Its Potential and Limitations in Effecting Change to the Place of Religion in the Irish Education System." *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 36 (3): 291–305. doi:10.1080/07256868.2015.1029891.
- Mawhinney, A. 2015b. "The Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief: Norms and Compliance." In *International Human Rights: Perspectives from Ireland*, edited by S. Egan, 267–282. London: Bloomsbury.
- Mawhinney, A., U. Niens, N. Richardson, and Y. Chiba. 2013. "Acculturation and Religion in Schools: The Views of Young People from Minority Belief Backgrounds." *British Educational Research Journal* 39 (5): 907–924. doi:10.1002/berj.3016.
- McGarry, P. 2017. "What Is It like to Grow up Muslim in Ireland?" *The Irish Times*, January 28. Available online.
- McGuinness, S. J. 2012. "Education Policy in Northern Ireland: A Review." *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education* 4 (1): 205–237. doi:10.14658/pupj-ijse-2012-1-9.
- NCCA. 2015. *Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics in the Primary School: Consultation Paper*. Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Available online.
- NINIS. 2011. *Religion in Northern Ireland 1861–2011*. Belfast: Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. Available online.
- O'Connell, D. 2017. "A Sleight Of Hand – Removal Of Religious Education From The Primary School Curriculum." *The Furrow* 68 (6): 361–367.
- O'Donnell, A. 2016. "Securitisation, Counterterrorism and the Silencing of Dissent: The Educational Implications of Prevent." *British Journal of Educational Studies* 64 (1): 53–76. doi:10.1080/00071005.2015.1121201.

- O'Donnell, A., P. Kieran, S. Cherouvis, L. Bergdahl, and E. With Langmann. 2019. *The Enquiring Classroom: Values, Identity, Exploration*. Brussels: Erasmus+ KA2. Available online.
- OSCE. 2007. *The Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools*. Warsaw: Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.
- Palmer, P. 1998. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. San Francisco: Wiley.
- Parker-Jenkins, M., M. Glenn, and J. G. Janmaat. 2014. *Reaching In, Reaching Out: Faith Schools, Community Engagement, and 21st-century Skills for Intercultural Understanding*. London: Institute of Education Press.
- Parker-Jenkins, M., and M. Masterson. 2013. "No Longer Catholic, White and Gaelic: Schools in Ireland Coming to Terms with Cultural Diversity." *Irish Educational Studies* 32 (4): 477–492. doi:10.1080/03323315.2013.851438.
- Teo, T. 2013. *Handbook of Quantitative Methods for Educational Research*. Rotterdam: Sense.
- Tuohy, D. 2013. *Denominational Education and Politics: Ireland in a European Context*. Dublin: Veritas.
- UN Refugee Agency. 2015. *Global Forced Displacement Reaches Record High*. Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Available online.
- Weisse, W. 2010. "REDCo: A European Research Project on Religion in Education." *Religion & Education* 37 (3): 187–202. doi:10.1080/15507394.2010.513937.
- Williams, K. 2005. *Faith and the Nation*. Dublin: Dominican Publications.
- Ziebertz, H. G., and W. K. Kay. 2009. *An International Empirical Study about Religiosity: Youth in Europe*. 2nd ed. Münster: Lit-Verlag.