



Catholic Primary Schools in a Changing Ireland
Sharing Good Practice on Inclusion of All Pupils



CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN A CHANGING IRELAND
SHARING GOOD PRACTICE ON INCLUSION OF ALL PUPILS



Catholic Schools Partnership

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crust

mantle

tsunami

Richter Scale

continental
drift

continents

plat

seismo

fault l

magn



GLOSSARY

Plateau - a large flat-topped area of land, often with steep sides. It is formed by the erosion of the top of a volcano.

Seismicity - the study of earthquakes and the propagation of seismic waves through the Earth.

Tsunami - a series of waves caused by the displacement of a large volume of water, often by an underwater earthquake or volcanic eruption.

Volcano - a mountain or hill with a crater or vent through which lava, rock fragments, hot steam, and ash are emitted.



Introduction

A large percentage of primary schools in the Republic of Ireland (89%) are under the patronage of the Catholic Church. This means that the ethos or characteristic spirit of the school is informed by the teachings and traditions of the Catholic faith. Catholic schools are caring and inclusive communities precisely because they are Catholic. They have adapted to demographic change with significant recent net migration into Ireland and many of them have led the way in integrating migrants into local communities. They have been leaders in areas such as social inclusion, special needs and Traveller education. An ESRI study¹ found that non-Catholic schools have a significantly higher proportion of children from professional, managerial and technical backgrounds and that 80% of parents with the top incomes send their children to these schools.² In contrast, children in Catholic schools come from just 20% of the top income families. The report also found a significantly higher number of children with learning difficulties and disabilities

in Catholic schools than in other school types.³ With regard to Traveller education the report states:

Most multi-denominational schools did not have any Traveller pupils. Catholic schools were more likely to have greater numbers of Traveller pupils compared to minority faith schools.⁴

Catholic schools have adapted to demographic change with significant recent net migration into Ireland and many of them have led the way in integrating migrants into local communities. They have been leaders in areas such as social inclusion, special needs and Traveller education.



¹ ESRI and Educate Together, *School Sector Variation Among Primary Schools in Ireland* (2012).

² *School Sector Variation Among Primary Schools in Ireland*, pp. 35–6. Top income refers to those in the 20% highest income bracket.

³ *School Sector Variation Among Primary Schools in Ireland*, pp. 41–3.

⁴ *School Sector Variation Among Primary Schools in Ireland*, p. 41.



It is clear then that one of the great strengths of the Catholic primary school system is its social inclusion so that in most parts of the country children from various social strata attend the same school together.

‘One of the great strengths of the Catholic primary school system is its social inclusion.’

The census of population (2011) found that 84% of the population self-identify as Catholic.⁵ In 2002 the figure was 88%. There is substantial regional variation in the numbers of Catholics, from 77% in the four Dublin local authorities⁶ and Galway city, to 82% in Cork City and somewhere between 84% and 90%⁷ in the rest of the country.

Over the past decade there has been a notable change in the profile of those attending Catholic

schools in Ireland. Irish-born Catholics have been joined by children from other backgrounds. These include other Catholic pupils whose parents have migrated into Ireland. There is also a significant minority of children from other faiths and those whose parents profess no religious faith. Many Catholic schools have been enriched as they have adapted to serve such a broad spectrum of pupils.

The rapidity of social and demographic change in Ireland naturally gives rise to certain tensions and new questions. These include issues relating to the inclusion of all pupils in denominational schools. The Irish Human Rights Commission⁸ and the final report of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector⁹ have both asked that this issue be addressed. In response, the Department of Education and Skills launched a consultation process on inclusiveness in primary schools in September 2013. The report on this consultation was published in July 2014.¹⁰ The report emphasises that it ‘does not set out to be prescriptive and recognises that each school has

⁵ Central Statistics Office, *Census 2011* (Government Publications: Dublin, 2012), available online at <http://www.cso.ie/en/census/census2011reports/>.

⁶ Dublin City, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, Fingal and South County Dublin.

⁷ Mayo has the largest proportion of Catholics at 90%.

⁸ Irish Human Rights Commission (IHRC), *Religion and Education: A Human Rights Perspective* (2011), available online at <http://www.ihrcc.ie/publications/list/religion-andeducation-a-human-rights-perspective>.

⁹ John Coolahan, Caroline Hussey and Fionnuala Kilfeather, *The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector: Report of the Forum's Advisory Group* (2012), available online at www.education.ie.

¹⁰ Department of Education and Skills, *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector: Progress to Date and Future Directions* (2014), available online at www.education.ie.

its own ethos and operates in a particular context'.¹¹ It notes that there is no one size that fits all when it comes to best practices concerning the inclusion of pupils in schools, as sufficient flexibility must be allowed for schools working in different contexts.¹² It identifies principles that currently inform best practice in schools that are dealing with these issues for many years. These principles include:

- Good communication
- Clarity on rights and responsibilities
- Good relationships between the various parties
- Openness to dialogue and compromise
- Flexibility.¹³

Finally, the report encourages all schools to develop policies that will foster best practice with regard to the inclusion of all pupils, and to use self-evaluation processes to review and update these policies.¹⁴

This booklet is a resource for Catholic schools in developing such policies and in sharing best practice. It is published in response to the Forum Report and to the recent *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector: Progress to Date and Future Directions* issued by the Department of Education and Skills

- *Good communication*
- *Clarity on rights and responsibilities*
- *Good relationships between the various parties*
- *Openness to dialogue and compromise*
- *Flexibility.*

In Part I of this paper there is an analysis of foundational issues, including a vision of what a Catholic primary school strives to be, while Part II details good practice with regard to the education of all pupils in Catholic primary schools. It should be emphasised that this document does not purport to provide a full understanding of Catholic schooling. Rather the focus is precisely on the holistic education of non-Catholic pupils in Catholic primary schools.

The development of this booklet has been a work of partnership over two years involving parents, pupils, teachers, principals and boards of management. It draws on the wisdom, experience and expertise of many people involved in and committed to Catholic schools. In particular, a debt of gratitude is owed to a working group which included Fr Michael Drumm, Chairperson of the CSP; Ms Elaine Mahon, Manager of Catechetical Publications, Veritas; Mr Seán Hourihane, Principal of Scoil Áine Naofa, Lucan, Co. Dublin; Fr Michael McGrath, Diocesan Adviser for Religious Education, Diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnois; and Mr Joe Searson, Diocesan Adviser for Religious Education, Diocese of Killaloe.

¹¹ *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector: Progress to Date and Future Directions*, p. 4.

¹² *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector: Progress to Date and Future Directions*, p. 5.

¹³ *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector: Progress to Date and Future Directions*, p. 19.

¹⁴ *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector: Progress to Date and Future Directions*, pp. 22–8.



HOPE

FAITH

LOVE

PEACE

BELIEVE

Part 1: Fundamental Principles

1.1 A Vision for Catholic Schools

The Catholic Schools Partnership has articulated the following vision for Catholic schools:

Catholic schools in Ireland are a living expression of a long and varied tradition of education inspired by the life of Christ as lived in the Church. Such schools emphasise the dignity of the human person as a child of God called to work with other persons in creating an inclusive community in service of the common good; where knowledge is sought and respected while faith is nurtured and challenged.

One can expand on this vision as follows:

... in Ireland ...

- there are about 2,900 Catholic primary schools in the Republic of Ireland
- parents are the most important educators of their children
- many Catholic primary schools are rooted in parish communities where they form a critical element in local life and foster a sense of shared responsibility for the educational enterprise
- home, school and parish work together in support of Catholic education

... a long and varied tradition ...

- witnessing to the centrality of the Gospel
- teaching and learning for more than 1,500 years
- expressed in different ways depending on the socio-economic context, not least through the leadership and energy of religious congregations
- changing in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century as lay leadership emerges in the Church to work alongside bishops, priests and religious

... dignity of the human person ...

- each person is made in the image of God and is called to share in God's own life forever
- valuing a broad curriculum and co-curricular activities in order to foster a deeper sense of the whole person
- emphasis on pastoral care and student support, not least for those who are educationally disadvantaged
- commitment to service of all students with special needs

... creating an inclusive community in service of the common good ...

- schools are communities made up of pupils, parents, staff, board members, patrons/trustees and all associated with the school
- schools seek a life-giving environment where all hear the call to service and the creation of a more caring human society
- growth in moral awareness and commitment to the search for justice, integrity and care for the earth
- in a more culturally diverse society Catholic schools welcome all that is positive in this new reality, instil an attitude of respect for the good of the other and welcome pupils of other faiths and none

... knowledge is sought and respected ...

- seeking excellence, including academic achievement, in the context of a broad Christian philosophy of education
- nourishing the body, mind and soul through a varied academic curriculum, involvement in the arts, physical education and sporting activity, and a commitment to moral development and personal responsibility
- respecting reason and scientific progress while maintaining a balance between the humanities and technology in education

- creating a dialogue between faith and contemporary culture which challenges instrumentalist and managerial approaches to education

... faith is nurtured and challenged ...

- Christians who are part of a school are invited to constantly rediscover what it is to be a follower of Christ
- a religious education which includes faith formation, prayer and sacramental experiences, and a growing awareness of being stewards of God's creation
- support for staff, principals, pupils, parents and members of boards in opening their hearts and minds to the presence of God
- continuing the mission of Christ entrusted to the Church to go and teach

1.2 The Irish Constitution

According to the Irish Constitution:

The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children.¹⁵

The Constitution clearly affirms the inalienable role of parents in education. It also acknowledges the importance of religious education. The State guarantees to respect the rights and duties of parents to provide for the religious education of their children. The Constitution notes that such education (including religious education) can be provided at home, in private schools or in schools recognised or established by the State.¹⁶ This is based on the principle of religious freedom. The legally recognised human right referred to as 'freedom of religion' can be thought of as comprising two distinct but equally important

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dimensions or moral rights. It is both a positive freedom *for* religion, e.g. the freedom to practice, manifest and share one's religious commitments (including the establishment of schools with a religious ethos), and a negative freedom *from* religious coercion, e.g. the freedom from coercion by public or private parties to *assent to* or *deny* any particular religious or philosophical proposition. Thus, it is wrong to simply understand freedom of religion as freedom from religion. Indeed, the Constitution understands a positive right to give expression to religious belief and the State has continued to emphasise this right.

Religious groups are free to establish their own schools to cater for members of their particular faith. This religious freedom is a core element in our system at primary and secondary level.¹⁷

1.3 Parental Rights

Parental choice in education is recognised in most democracies and enshrined in the Irish Constitution, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in United Nations and European legal instruments. It is also strongly affirmed in the teaching of the Catholic Church. This principle clearly holds that parents have the right

¹⁵ *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, article 42.1.

¹⁶ Article 42.2.

¹⁷ Government of Ireland, *Ireland's Fourth Periodic Report under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (2012), p. 168.

to educate their children in accord with their social, political, cultural, linguistic, religious and moral convictions. Whilst others may disagree with these views, the parents' decisions concerning a child's education should be respected and, where practicable, should be facilitated.

1.4 State Regulation

While a large percentage of schools are under the patronage of the Catholic Church, these schools, like all schools in the Republic of Ireland, are regulated by the State through the Department of Education and Skills (DES). The DES strictly regulates the curriculum of schools on advice from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and through the inspectorate's evaluation and inspection processes. Section 30 of the Education Act (1998) states that the Minister determines:

- a) the subjects to be offered in recognised schools;
- b) the syllabus of each subject;
- c) the amount of instruction time to be allotted to each subject;
- d) the guidance and counselling provision to be offered in schools.

Schools are managed by a board of management but they cannot be described as 'self-governing' as most of their governance is determined by national policies.

- Section 9 of the Education Act defines in exact detail the functions of a recognised school.
- Section 13 describes at length the powers of the inspectorate.
- Section 15 demands that a board of management of a recognised school carry out its functions in accord with the policies determined by the Minister.

- Schools must comply with extensive legislation and the *Rules for National Schools*.
- Schools must implement the multitude of circulars and guidelines which issue from the DES.

The exact composition of boards of management at primary level is prescribed by the DES through its *Constitution and Rules of Procedure of Boards of Management*.¹⁸

1.5 The Second Vatican Council

Though it took place some fifty years ago, the teaching and pastoral insights of the Second Vatican Council are still being received and interpreted in the broader Catholic community today. The Council heralded a new openness to the modern world which has been expressed most forcibly through various dialogues: with other Christians; with people of other faiths; with non-believers. The most powerful symbolic expression of these dialogues has been in Assisi where St John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI gathered with leaders of Christian Churches and other faiths. Dialogue takes place at various levels, from international gatherings to local communities, from universities to schools and colleges. The most important dialogue is that between faith and reason. Pope Benedict XVI consistently drew attention to this fundamental issue. At his meeting with representatives of British society in Westminster Hall he said:

I would suggest that the world of reason and the world of faith – the world of secular rationality and the world of religious belief – need one another and should not be afraid to enter into a profound and ongoing dialogue, for the good of our civilization.¹⁹

He has described the Second Vatican Council as dedicated to finding a new definition of the

¹⁸ Department of Education and Skills, *Boards of Management of National Schools: Constitution of Boards and Rules of Procedure* (Dublin, 2011).

¹⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, Meeting with Representatives of British Society, including the Diplomatic Corps, Politicians, Academics and Business Leaders, Westminster Hall, 17 September 2010.



relationships between the Church and the modern age, between the Church and the modern State and between Christian faith and other religions.²⁰ Catholic schools and colleges are continually reinterpreting these various relationships as they are at the forefront of the interaction between Catholic faith and modern science, between Catholic institutions and democratic governments, and the encounter with those of other faiths and none.

The ongoing reception and interpretation of Vatican II now takes place in the context of the ministry of Pope Francis. He has challenged all members of the Church to reach out again to the world, not least to those who are on the margins of society. The ministry of Pope Francis gives renewed energy to Catholic schools in creating a mature relationship with modernity, in seeking to

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Pope Francis says that the social dimension of the preaching of the Gospel is critically important. Christians are called to live with others and for others. This is because God, in Christ, has redeemed society as a whole and not just each person as an individual. Faith is not just a private matter between an individual person and God. This is an important insight for Catholic education. Pope Francis states:

No one can demand that religion should be relegated to the inner sanctum of personal life, without influence on societal and national life, without concern for the soundness of civil institutions, without a right to offer an opinion on events affecting society. Who would claim to lock up in a church and silence the message of St Francis of Assisi or Blessed Teresa of Calcutta? They themselves would have found this unacceptable. An authentic faith – which is never comfortable or completely personal – always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it.²¹

²⁰ Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia, 22 December 2005.

²¹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), #183.

1.6 The Characteristic Spirit of a Catholic School

Every school has its own ethos or characteristic spirit. In the Education Act 15 (2) (b) this characteristic spirit of the school is understood as being ‘determined by the cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which inform and are characteristic of the objectives and conduct of the school’. It is clear from this that Catholic schools will vary depending on their history and the socio-demographic realities of the

Every school has its own ethos or characteristic spirit.

communities that they serve. Yet, from the small rural school serving a local community, to the large urban school serving a very diverse population, all are challenged to give expression to their characteristic spirit through the lens of Catholic faith. This is best understood as an invitation to allow Catholic faith inform the values and traditions that are lived out and nurtured on a daily basis in the school. It should not be understood as something static or oppressive but as a challenge to engage with the liberating message of the Gospel.

1.7 Diversity Within a School

Among the students who attend Catholic schools in Ireland and beyond are those who do not come from Catholic families. In many cases parents opt for this type of education and welcome the ethos and values which underpin such schools. In some other cases parents may have little or no choice but to send their child to a Catholic school. This raises the question of opting out of some classes. Article 44.2.4 of the

Irish Constitution acknowledges the right of a child not to attend religious instruction in a school. The Supreme Court has commented on this as follows:

The Constitution therefore distinguishes between religious ‘education’ and religious ‘instruction’ – the former being the much wider term. A child who attends a school run by a religious denomination different from his own may have a constitutional right not to attend religious instruction at that school but the Constitution cannot protect him from being influenced, to some degree, by the religious ‘ethos’ of the school. A religious denomination is not obliged to change the general atmosphere of its school merely to accommodate a child of a different religious persuasion who wishes to attend that school.²²

Catholic schools respect and acknowledge the right of parents who require that their children be excluded from religious instruction. The manner in which such an opt out is facilitated is related to available resources. Schools are committed to facilitating parents in this regard, but they can only do so as resources are made available so that the school complies with its own policies on curriculum, supervision and child safeguarding. The provision of such resources is the responsibility of the Minister. However, even with current resources, Catholic schools have developed local arrangements to accommodate the valid wishes of such parents.

Some commentators have raised concerns about the integrated curriculum with regard to this issue. It should be noted that the philosophical basis of such a curricular approach is not the desire to integrate religious education into all other subjects but the pedagogical principle that subject specificities are irrelevant in early childhood learning. Thus, children are introduced

²² Mr Justice Barrington, *Campaign to Separate Church and State Ltd v. Minister for Education* [1998] 3 IR 321.

into an integrated world rather than one arbitrarily divided into discrete academic subjects.

It must be emphasised that the vast majority of Catholic schools handle the issue of diversity with sensitivity and respect. The *Chief Inspector's Report 2010–12* clearly indicates that the overwhelming majority of parents and pupils find their schools to be well managed and welcoming. The Report states that:

Some very positive findings were reported about the management of pupils in primary schools in the period 2010–2012. During notified WSEs (whole-school evaluations), 96% of schools were found to be managing their pupils effectively by, for example, fostering respectful pupil–teacher interactions, by cultivating an inclusive, child-centred ethos and by using positive strategies to promote good behaviour. Incidental inspections similarly found that the management of pupils was effective in practically all (96%) of the classrooms visited.²³

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Given that this report is based on impressive research both in its breadth and its depth, great weight must be attached to its findings. The Report tells us that these findings are based on:

- Almost 800 whole-school evaluations;
- Over 1,100 incidental inspections;

- Thematic inspections of planning and target setting in thirty-four DEIS schools;
- Almost 36,000 confidential pupil questionnaires administered to pupils in fourth and sixth class in larger schools and to pupils in third, fourth, fifth and sixth classes in smaller schools during the course of whole-school evaluations;
- More than 47,600 confidential parental questionnaires administered to parents of a selected sample of pupils in larger schools and to all parents in small schools during the course of whole-school evaluations.²⁴

The aim of these guidelines is to enhance the already excellent work being undertaken in schools.

It is clear then that Catholic schools are inclusive and welcoming places for the vast majority of children who attend them. The aim of these guidelines is to enhance the already excellent work being undertaken in schools as clearly evidenced in the *Chief Inspector's Report 2010–12*.

1.8 Religious Education

The Education Act 30 (2) (d) requires the Minister to ensure that time is set aside in each school day for 'subjects relating to or arising from the characteristic spirit of the school'. In Catholic schools this time is devoted to the programme in religious education (RE).

Religious education is an integral part of the revised *Primary School Curriculum*.²⁵ One general objective of the curriculum is that each child should be enabled to 'develop a knowledge and understanding of his or her own religious

²³ Department of Education and Skills, *Chief Inspector's Report 2010–12* (Dublin, 2013), p. 34.

²⁴ *Chief Inspector's Report 2010–12*, p. 30.

²⁵ National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, *Primary School Curriculum* (Dublin, 1999).



traditions and beliefs, with respect for religious traditions and beliefs of others'.²⁶ This objective reflects Catholic Church teaching in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council as outlined earlier.

With these principles in mind, the draft *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland* has among its objectives the need to 'prepare young children for living in contact with other Christians and people of other religious faiths, affirming their Catholic identity, while respecting the faiths of others'.²⁷ While the intercultural and inter-religious dimension will be embedded in the programme and explored thematically, the curriculum further proposes that children will have formal study of faiths other than Christianity in each year. The following set of basic principles of inter-religious dialogue will guide the delivery of this inter-religious education:²⁸

a) All children in Catholic schools have a right to learn about diverse faiths. Teaching about world faith traditions should not be based on the number of pupils who come from diverse faiths in a class or school.

- b) Children should be given accurate, clear, age- and ability-appropriate information concerning faith traditions.
- c) The positive aspects of the faith tradition should be explored and the teacher should avoid stereotypes and superficial understandings. The teacher should not focus excessively on what children may perceive as unusual details of a faith tradition, which may give them an unbalanced view.
- d) Particular faiths should be studied in their own right and not only by comparison with other faiths.
- e) Teachers in Catholic schools should show children that there are many living faiths practised by ordinary people in contemporary Ireland. Ideally, local members of faith traditions should be invited into the Catholic school to inform the children about their religious beliefs and practices.

²⁶ *Primary School Curriculum*, p. 36.

²⁷ Irish Episcopal Conference, Draft *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland*, p. 14.

²⁸ See Patricia Kieran and Anne Hession, *Children, Catholicism and Religious Education* (Dublin: Veritas, 2005), p. 283.

f) Teachers should ensure that children from within any faith are treated with sensitivity. While some may wish to discuss their faith, others may not. Teachers should not assume that any child can be automatically drawn upon as a source of information.

All religious education in Catholic schools should be informed by the National Directory for Catechesis, *Share the Good News*.²⁹ The following is a sample of the spirit and vision of this foundational document, relevant to the topic of inclusion:

- a) Catholic schools are inclusive and welcoming of Catholic pupils and pupils of other traditions (124, 168);
- b) Catholic schools will respect the religious traditions of other students (147);

c) Catholic schools seek to co-operate with parents of other traditions who wish to provide religious instruction for the children in their own tradition (101).³⁰

The term used to describe the time spent on religious learning in schools in both the *Rules for National Schools* and the Irish Constitution is 'religious instruction'. It could be argued, however, that this phrase, while an important legal term, does not do justice to the totality of what happens as part of a broader religious education in primary schools.

John Hull suggests, for example, that there are three different ways to teach religious education in schools: 'learning into religion', 'learning about religion' and 'learning from religion'.³¹ All three types of learning are evident in Catholic primary schools today.



²⁹ Irish Episcopal Conference, *Share the Good News: National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland* (Dublin: Veritas, 2010).

³⁰ See also Irish Episcopal Conference, *Catholic Primary Schools: A Policy for Provision into the Future* (2007), 4.3.

³¹ John Hull, 'The contribution of Religious Education to Religious Freedom: A Global Perspective', *Religious Education in Schools: Ideas & Experiences from around the World*, IARF, ed. (London, 2001), pp. 1–8.

‘Learning into religion’ is most appropriate for the many children in Catholic primary schools who are baptised Catholics. Good religious education will help them to grow into their faith. This type of learning could also be described, therefore, as

‘There are three different ways to teach religious education in schools: ‘learning into religion’, ‘learning about religion’ and ‘learning from religion’. All three types of learning are evident in Catholic primary schools today.’

‘faith formation’. For example, Catholic children in first and second class could participate in an Ash Wednesday ritual, and might enter into the spirit of Lent by making particular promises. This type of learning is also open to, and may be appropriate for, children of other Christian denominations. ‘Learning into religion’ is the aspect of religious education that can also be described as ‘religious instruction’. However, it is important to note that religious instruction is just one part of the learning that is undertaken as part of religious education in Catholic schools.

‘Learning about religion’, a second dimension of religious education, refers to pupils’ learning about the beliefs, teachings and practices of the great religious traditions of the world. In a Catholic school, children will learn primarily about Christianity. This type of learning is open to all children. For example, all children can learn that Lent is a season of prayer, fasting and almsgiving for Christians. In addition to this, children in Catholic schools should also learn about faiths other than Christianity. For example, they might learn about how their local Hindu

community celebrates the festival of Diwali. The report from the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector advocates ‘Education about Religion and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics’ for all children. This contributes to the development of tolerant and religiously educated citizens.

‘Learning from religion’ refers to what children learn *from* religion *for* themselves. This involves evaluating both *what* has been learned and *how* it has impacted on their lived commitments. It builds on ‘learning about religion’ by ensuring that religious education is not reduced to the mere presentation of information, but that children are invited to learn from what they are discovering. For example, children in a Catholic school might learn about the practice of almsgiving during Lent. Christian children might understand this as an expression of their

‘Religious education in a Catholic school is open and inclusive.’

compassion for those who are poor, following the example of Jesus. Concurrently, children who come from a humanist, atheist or agnostic background might see in almsgiving a good charitable practice in which they would also like to engage.

Religious education in a Catholic school is open and inclusive, and children who are not Catholic should therefore be invited to participate in and to engage with the religious education programme in various ways. Such education has nothing in common with indoctrination that amounts to a deliberate harming of students by undermining their natural ability to reason. In contrast, Catholic schools are committed to the



deepest respect for both faith and reason and, as such, they contribute significantly to the formation of rational and mature citizens of democratic society.

1.9 Educating to Intercultural Dialogue

Catholic schools in Ireland form part of a large international network of such schools throughout the world. Ever since the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Education, the Holy See has published many important documents on Catholic education. The most recent is entitled *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools*.³² It provides important reflections on what it is to be a Catholic school in a globalised world characterised by cultural and religious pluralism. Education is the key to mutual understanding and to building a civilisation of peace in such a complex world. The document challenges Catholic schools to engage in dialogue through facing the reality of a culturally diverse situation, by overcoming prejudices and by

education through encounter with the other. It notes that 'schools are privileged places for intercultural dialogue'.³³

Catholic schools are committed to the deepest respect for both faith and reason and, as such, they contribute significantly to the formation of rational and mature citizens of democratic society.

What is this intercultural dialogue? It is not cultural relativism which suggests that all cultures and traditions are essentially the same and often seeks to quarantine related practices within a purely private sphere of life. Nor is it religious fundamentalism which fails to engage with that which is other and withdraws into a ghetto, secure in its own unchallenged identity. Rather it is an invitation to engagement with the

³² Congregation for Catholic Education, *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools: Living in Harmony for a Civilisation of Love* (Vatican City, 2013).

³³ *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools*, no. 6.

other person's faith and culture based on innovative and courageous fidelity to one's own faith and culture. Such dialogue is not just talking but it includes all inter-religious relationships with both individuals and communities.³⁴ It seeks common ethical values which are the foundations of justice and peace. The aim of this dialogue is not to abandon one's own inherited faith and practices but to rediscover them in a deeper way through encounter with the other. This is the opposite of relativism.

The relativistic model is founded on the value of tolerance, but limits itself to accepting the other person, excluding the possibility of dialogue and recognition of each other in mutual transformation. Such an idea of tolerance, in fact, leads to a substantially passive meaning of relationship with whoever has a different culture. It does not demand that one take an interest in the needs and sufferings of others, nor that their reasons may be heard; there is no self-comparison with their values, and even less sense of developing love for them.³⁵

How can a Catholic school be a vehicle of such intercultural dialogue? The document notes four types of dialogue: the dialogue of life; the dialogue of works; theological dialogue; and the dialogue of religious experience. The dialogue of life reflects on the joys, challenges and sorrows of life, especially in the context of the fundamental realities of family, language and culture. The dialogue of works encourages those involved to collaborate in the holistic development of all men and women. Theological dialogue demands knowledge of the beliefs of various religious traditions and their mutual interaction. The dialogue of religious experience is based on the lived encounter of various faiths, not on intellectual abstractions, but rather on the actual lives of the faithful. A Catholic primary school should facilitate the dialogue of life, the dialogue of works and the dialogue of religious experience; it is not the time or place in life for theological dialogue. The dialogue of life, the dialogue of works and the dialogue of religious experience can involve all faith traditions present in the school. Pupils whose parents wish them to have no faith affiliation should be invited to share in the dialogue of life and the dialogue of works.

³⁴ *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools*, no. 13.

³⁵ *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools*, no. 22.



Part 2: Developing and Sharing Good Practice

Part II of this document gives examples of good practices with regard to the holistic education of all pupils in Catholic primary schools. These practices should be read in the context of the principles that were considered in Part I. Schools should adapt these practices to their local circumstances.

2.1 Admissions Policy and Mission Statement

In the Mission Statement there should be a clear declaration that the school is a Catholic school under the patronage of the local Catholic bishop. It is suggested that the policy should briefly explain what a Catholic school is and how this school lives its Catholic ethos in the particular community, be it a small rural parish or a large urban setting. A brief explanation of ‘patronage’ should also be included. Applicant parents should understand that the characteristic spirit or ethos underpinning the school permeates the whole school day and not just during religious education classes. The vision statement detailed in Part I might prove useful in informing non-Catholic parents about the holistic understanding of education that underpins Catholic schools. In offering an understanding of the ethos of the school the policy should be positive about diversity and inclusion. The presence of children from diverse backgrounds can enrich the life of the school community.

Many of the issues around inclusion and diversity might be best addressed at a pre-enrolment meeting. All parents of prospective pupils should have ready access to the school’s enrolment policy. Any issues parents may have in relation to their child’s spiritual welfare may be addressed with the principal. At this meeting the principal should discuss what it means that the school embraces

the Catholic ethos. Parents should understand that there may be prayers at assembly and at other moments during the school day. For children of other faiths and none these times should be used for reflection. Parents should also be made aware that Catholic children prepare for the Sacraments of Eucharist, Reconciliation and Confirmation.

2.2 Inclusion in Religious Education

Religious education is an integral part of the revised *Primary School Curriculum* (1999). In a Catholic school, religious education should prepare children for living in community with people of their own and other faith traditions and none. To this end, the draft *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland* has proposed that a specific amount of time be set aside each year for the study of faiths other than Christianity. Twelve perspectives informed the development of the curriculum and these include the ‘ecumenical and inter-religious perspective’ and the ‘intercultural perspective’.³⁶ The curriculum describes the development of inter-religious literacy as follows:

Skills of inter-religious literacy enable children to be able to speak the public language of religion; to comprehend and appreciate the place of religious and philosophical beliefs and practices in human life; to understand the need for dialogue among Christians; to develop powers of empathy for and sensitivity towards people of other religions and beliefs; to explore the beliefs and practices of other world religions; to enter into dialogue with people of other religions and beliefs; and to foster awareness of shared values such as justice, peace, the dignity of the human person and openness to the transcendent.³⁷

³⁶ Draft *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland*, pp. 14–15.

³⁷ Draft *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland*, p. 27.

Fostering such literacy will require that teachers be given opportunities to update their knowledge and skills in the area of inter-religious learning which would build on the initial religious education qualification that all teachers in Catholic schools must have.

At primary level the process of learning about other Christian denominations and other religious traditions is mainly about awareness, attitudes, relationships and values. Inter-religious learning establishes the basis for appropriate relationships with religious others.³⁸ To this end, the religious festivals of all children in the class could be recognised as one very important way of acknowledging the children's significance and valuing their identities.³⁹

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The formal curriculum of inter-religious education focuses on teaching children to respect other people's ways of praying, their holy objects, religious stories, sacred writings and beliefs.⁴⁰ At all times children learn that respect and love ought to be extended to those who think or act differently than they do in religious matters.⁴¹

The curriculum identifies specific ideas for inter-religious learning including the following:

At junior level (4–8 year olds):

- a) Children could be invited to listen to and discuss simple stories about children in other faith communities in Ireland;

- b) Children could be taught to identify Christian and other faith communities in their locality;
- c) At 7–8 years old children could be taught to recognise their own religious identities and the religious and/or cultural identities of others.

The formal curriculum of inter-religious education focuses on teaching children to respect other people's ways of praying, their holy objects, religious stories, sacred writings and beliefs.

At senior level (9–12 years):

- a) Children could begin to discuss the importance of religious or philosophical beliefs in the lives of people in their communities;
- b) Children could start to investigate the religious practice of children in other Christian, Jewish and Muslim communities in Ireland (e.g. how they pray);
- c) Children could research religious faith communities with a significant local presence;
- d) Local members of faith traditions could be invited into the school to inform the children about their religious beliefs and practices;
- e) Children could investigate ways of respecting and learning *about* and *from* people who adhere to other religions in their community;
- f) Children could be invited to investigate how people of other religions and beliefs in Ireland practise their beliefs today;
- g) Children could relate the practices of people from other religious communities to their own Catholic religious practice;
- h) Children might be encouraged to engage in ecumenical and interfaith activities such as identifying ways in which pupils of all beliefs

³⁸ Draft *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland*, p. 19.

³⁹ Anne Hession, 'Interreligious Education and the Future of Religious Education in Catholic Primary Schools', *Toward Mutual Ground: Pluralism, Religious Education and Diversity in Irish Schools*, Gareth Byrne and Patricia Kieran, eds (Dublin: Columba Press, 2013), p. 171.

⁴⁰ Draft *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland*, p. 44.

⁴¹ Draft *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland*, p. 73.



in the school can engage with local community projects based around charity and justice;

- i) Teachers could invite outside speakers or parents who are involved in faith-based charitable organisations to share their commitment to creating a better world.

In order to ensure that parents from both Christian and other faith traditions understand the nature of religious education in an Irish Catholic primary school, information should be made available to them on enrolment, alongside other material that is being provided to parents at this important time in their child's life. This information would give an overview of the programme of religious education in place in Catholic primary schools, as well as the activities that are linked to the ethos of the school. A sample of this information is available here. Schools are encouraged to amend this according to their own particular circumstances.

Sample Information for Parents Regarding the Nature of Religious Education in the Catholic Primary School

As a Catholic school, religious education is provided for pupils in accordance with the doctrines, practices and traditions of the Catholic Church. Catholic children will be provided with religious experiences that will help them to develop their faith, such as prayer and sacramental preparation. In addition to these activities, all children will also learn *about* and *from* the beliefs, teachings and practices of the great religious traditions of the world, with a particular focus on Christianity. This type of learning is open to, and inclusive of, all children, regardless of their faith background. Children from all faith traditions and none are therefore welcome to participate in the religious education programme that the school provides.

2.3 Management of 'Opt out' from Religious Education

In addition to setting out an overview of the religious education programme and how it is managed throughout the school, this information should also set out a procedure for dealing with any requests made for 'opt out' from religious education. Such a procedure may include a presentation by the principal teacher and/or postholder [if one is assigned this role], giving an overview of the religious education policy to new applicant parents/guardians at an 'information meeting' pre-enrolment.

Where parents/guardians raise issues of concern in regard to the content of the religious education policy, an opportunity should be provided for them to meet individually with the principal or teacher/postholder. The purpose of this meeting is:

- a) To allay any concerns parents/guardians may have;
- b) To answer specific questions parents/guardians may have arising from either the information meeting or the programme content, as set out in the information document;
- c) To enable the parents/guardians to make an informed decision in regard to withdrawal from religious education or otherwise.

The information should also advise of the options the school can provide for children when a request for 'opt out' from religious education is made. These may include:

- a) Staying within the classroom following an interesting, educationally appropriate and child-friendly activity, where alternative supervision is not feasible;



- b) Split timetabling of religious education between class streams;
- c) Supervised project work/research in another room [where a member of staff is available];
- d) Parent/guardian absenting the child for the purpose of receiving religious instruction elsewhere.

Other practical situations may arise from time to time that require the school to consider making accommodations for children who do not share the Catholic faith. In most circumstances the school should be in a position to bring these to the attention of parents at an enrolment meeting and then to plan well in advance for such eventualities. Children of other faiths should be invited but not obliged to attend all Catholic religious celebrations in the school. Individual children, with parental consent, can be invited to read special prayers/texts promoting core values such as respect and tolerance, which are common to many faith groups. Parents may decide to excuse their child from school for the duration of any of these celebrations. Appropriate procedures should be in place to facilitate any such request e.g. written notification to the principal teacher.

A Catholic school, in a spirit of inclusivity, could incorporate an ‘inter-religious’ element to these celebrations, where appropriate, without compromising its core values. Consideration may need to be given to the timing of events. All staff should be familiar with the policy and procedures, thereby enabling them to respond positively to parental requests and concerns as necessary.

2.4 Sacramental Preparation

Involvement in the preparation of Catholic children for the Sacraments of First Reconciliation, First Communion and Confirmation is an integral part of the life of a Catholic primary school. First Reconciliation and First Communion are celebrated during second

class and Confirmation normally takes place in sixth class. Over the course of the school year, 2.5 hours are devoted to religious education each week. This average is also maintained during second class and sixth class. Schools should take care that this amount of time is not exceeded. The time allocated to religious education is sufficient to cover sacramental preparation. The issue of encroachment on the time for other curriculum areas need not be problematic when the overall year is taken into account.

Parish programmes such as *Do This in Memory* and *You Shall Be My Witnesses* have significantly improved the level of parish input into the preparation for the sacraments, while also encouraging parents/guardians to prepare their children appropriately in their own homes. Such preparation is not an either/or in school or outside, but can be both/and. It should not lead to any diminishment of the valuable work being achieved in school time.

For children whose parents do not wish them to receive these Catholic sacraments, Section 2.3 gives examples of how such pupils can opt out of the programme. These pupils may wish to participate in choirs, art, drama and other aspects of school support for the sacramental programme. Where there are a significant number of pupils who are not participating in sacramental preparation, the school could timetable the religious education class in a manner most suited to facilitate their parents/guardians.

2.5 Intercultural Dialogue – Some Suggestions

In Part I of this document the Vatican publication, *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools*, was introduced. Some practical implications of this intercultural approach are suggested here. The document speaks of different types of dialogue. The dialogue of life,



the dialogue of works and the dialogue of religious experience can involve all faith traditions present in the school. Pupils whose parents wish them to have no faith affiliation should be invited to share in the dialogue of life and the dialogue of works.

2.5.1 The Dialogue of Life

The dialogue of life reflects on the joys, challenges and sorrows of life, especially in the context of the fundamental realities of family, language and culture.

- a) All pupils in the school are made to feel welcome. This could include school displays, welcome notices in various languages, or flags of the various countries represented.
- b) Members of the board of management and of the school community engage in self-evaluation to ensure that the school retains its sense of inclusiveness.
- c) Cultural days are held in school where the various cultures represented are celebrated.
- d) When problems such as bullying and conflict situations arise, children are taught to be reconciled with one another in a respectful way, knowing the values of forgiveness and love. Reconciliation is a feature of daily life and children are encouraged to grow in appreciation of human dignity.
- e) The school provides mentoring opportunities for newly arrived international pupils and their parents.
- f) Children and parents are invited to dress in their national costumes and perform dance, music and poetry on appropriate occasions.
- g) The Parents' Association encourages parents from other traditions to be active in school life.
- h) Key materials are translated as resources allow.

2.5.2 The Dialogue of Works

The dialogue of works encourages those involved to collaborate in the holistic development of all men and women.

- a) School assemblies seek to awaken a sense of common responsibility for the future of humanity.
- b) All pupils are involved in development education projects, awakening a sense of responsibility towards those who are most in need.
- c) The school is involved in supporting local charities.
- d) School assemblies instil in students a sense of respect and care for the other person.
- e) All pupils participate in Green Flag and similar projects.
- f) The school is committed to developing the environmental awareness of pupils through the integrated curriculum.
- g) The school forms links with a school in a developing country.

2.5.3 The Dialogue of Religious Experience

The dialogue of religious experience is based on the lived encounter of various faiths, not on intellectual abstractions, but rather on the actual lives of the faithful.

- a) School assemblies acknowledge major festivals associated with other faiths/traditions that are present in the school.
- b) Children are encouraged to share their beliefs and their cultural experiences, both within the classroom and amongst their friends. This can happen spontaneously through daily news and through integration with the curriculum.

- c) Using the internet, children grow an awareness of other faiths and cultures.
- d) Children make PowerPoint presentations for various projects and topics of interest, especially related to other faiths and cultures present within the school.
- e) Children of different faiths are given the opportunity to explain their beliefs to their classmates.
- f) Children are educated about other faiths through course work and projects.
- g) The school celebrates an intercultural week each year which highlights the faiths and cultures present in the school.
- h) All students are invited to participate in sacramental events/ceremonies.

2.6 Reflecting on Good Practice

All Catholic primary schools are invited to participate in *A process for understanding, supporting and taking ownership of the characteristic spirit in a Catholic school*.⁴² This process was developed by the Catholic Schools Partnership and many schools are using it as a useful instrument in reflecting on the meaning of their Catholic identity. The process will be revised in 2015 to include a section on best practice with regard to the holistic education of pupils of other faiths and no faith in Catholic schools. This will provide schools with a mechanism to reflect on and develop good practice in the context of the lived ethos of the school.

⁴² Catholic Schools Partnership, *A process for understanding, supporting and taking ownership of the characteristic spirit in a Catholic school* (Maynooth, 2012). Available at www.catholicschools.ie.

Harmony

Dream

Spirit

Peace

Believe

Hope

Trust

Faith

Love

Serenity

Conclusion

This document is offered as a service to Catholic primary schools as they reflect on their practices with regard to the holistic education of all pupils in the school. Such holistic education includes religious education as part of a dialogue that opens up some of the most important questions in human life. Part I comments on the fundamental principles that inform such an

approach from a Catholic perspective, while Part II provides concrete suggestions on how these principles might be followed through in practice. Each school will need to adapt these concrete suggestions to local circumstances, and the Catholic Schools Partnership will provide updates on good practice through its website www.catholicschools.ie.



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