Faith Formation in the Irish School System

Anachronistic.

Incongruous.

In the Way.

The Situation

Faith formation in Irish Schools, and most particularly for those in the Roman Catholic faith, is a long and well-established practice. The HAI has no issue with this. Indeed, the HAI has no reason to have an issue with this.

Whilst the HAI is an organisation that advocates for a secular society, it is not in the business of advising Irish parents on the schools their children should attend, or the religious instruction that they may or may not wish their children to have. This is a matter for those parents alone to consider.

However, an increasingly noteworthy feature of the current situation in Irish society is the dynamic movement in population characteristics in recent years. Census 2022 revealed a 10% drop in the number of people who identify as Roman Catholics[i]. This represents a decline of Roman Catholics in the total population from 79% in 2016 to 69% in 2022. By contrast Census 2022 reports a 63% rise in those stating they have no religion. This cohort of 736,210 citizens now represents 14% of the total population.

Also significant is the movement within the children (0-14) cohort, which increased from 881,000 in 2016 to 1,011,000 in 2022. Even if the 14% figure above remained static over the next five or six years, this would still require some reconsideration as to how education services will be delivered to these children. In reality it is more likely that education planning should be based on further growth in the existing 14% figure.

These shifts in demographics and societal norms are – understandably – prompting a reappraisal of practice in many aspects of Irish life, and not least in the teaching profession. At its annual congress in April 2024, members of the Irish National Teachers Organisation instructed its union to "survey members on whether they believe Catholic faith formation should take place in schools and whether primary schools should have secular or religious patrons. Speakers told the congress that Irish society has changed and that schools must too."[ii]

The National School system in Ireland was first introduced in 1831. These schools were required to be "kept open for a certain number of hours on four or five days a week for moral and literary education only." Religious education could take place separately on the times and days remaining. It seems somewhat ironic that this practice – established in the 1830s – is closer to what the HAI would wish to see in our contemporary situation.

The Complication

The complication presented here derives from the situation described in the preceding page. Specifically, it derives from the shifting demographic noted over the past twenty years and in particular the capacity or otherwise of the state education system to address the social, cultural, and educational needs of young children arriving to Ireland – or increasingly being born in Ireland as the children of immigrant parents.

For these children of immigrant families - together with the children of those established Irish families who declared themselves as "non-religious" in the 2022 census – the continuing emphasis on long entrenched religious instruction practices can be a frustrating and excluding process. This can represent a very real complication in the learning journey of young children.

In March 2023 Minister Norma Foley announced a move towards more 'fact-based" subjects, such as science and math, and a reduced emphasis on religion which was to be reduced from two-and-a-half hours to two hours per week[iii]. This is a welcome development.

In 2015 the Catholic Education Partnership published a document entitled *Understanding and Living the Ethos*. It was noted that "Catholic schools have a robust spiritual and moral value system. This is appreciated not only by the Catholic parents, but also by laypeople of other religions or none who want their children to be educated in a Catholic school. A Catholic school cannot relinquish its own freedom to proclaim the Gospel and to offer a formation based on the values to be found in a Christian education; this is its right and duty"[iv].

In October 2021, the Irish Times reported on the challenges facing teachers and parents in relation to faith formation in schools. It reported that "it is so uncomfortable and traumatising for a child who is trying to opt out of faith formation. It is a public shaming. And even if religion was taught at one time across the school so parents could withdraw their children, it seeps into other subjects. So, ultimately children and parents have no choice but to be indoctrinated. It's time we changed things. A parent said that my boy started his life in Ireland in Communion year in the local Catholic school. He spent up to an hour a day at the back of the class whilst the rest of the students prepared for the sacrament. He was given pictures, often holy pictures, to colour in. A teacher added that we don't have the resources or staff to send children into a different room, so they stay where they are"[v].

Article 44 of the Constitution states that every child has the right to attend a denominational school receiving State funding without having to participate in religious instruction in the school[vi]. It would seem however that in some respects this remains a complicated aspiration.

The Question

The question arising therefore is how we can move from a complicated aspiration to a real and meaningful set of systems and structures that allows children to opt out of faith formation in schools, and which enables their parents to make these decisions in a clear, simple, and transparent manner.

Implicit in this question is why schools find it so difficult to deal with this issue. At one level it seems that simple factors such as physical space, alternative classroom accommodation, alternative learning resources, and inadequate staff resources and supervision, act as barriers to progress. Of course, in practice these are never just "simple factors". They require to be funded out of annual budget allocations – which typically have many other competing calls for funding.

Another dimension to this question is why schools – which should serve as a strong integrating force for children of all backgrounds – actually serve to accentuate the "otherness" of some children by splitting them out of the main classroom group and leave them to "colour in pictures" to no apparent purpose. This is in no way to suggest that schools do this in in a wilfully negative manner. But it does – even if unwittingly – serve to frustrate social integration within the school system which in turn adversely impacts those children from a different ethnic or cultural background as well as children from an Irish background whose parents have declared they are non-religious and do not want their children impacted by this faith formation.

The question also arises as to why this "designed in" inequality continues in a context where schools, and the teachers working within those schools, in all other respects are doing their best to create and sustain a culture of equality and tolerance within the school environment.

The reduction in classroom hours for religion has been noted above. In tandem with this initiative, it was announced that a new "religious, ethical, multi-belief and values education" subject will be introduced[vii] aimed at giving pupils a wider perspective on faith and beliefs. This is a welcome development. The particular question raised by the HAI is why many state-funded schools in the Catholic faith persist with practices of religious indoctrination and faith formation which are exclusively focused on one religion and essentially ignore other faiths and belief systems.

The HAI considers this practice to be anachronistic, out of step with the patterns emerging from recent census data, and increasingly incongruous in a context where parents may not have access to a non-Catholic school.

The Answer

There are answers to this question. However, some of these answers require things to be looked at differently and for solutions to be found in different places. Part of this new way of thinking about things is to move from a model that is "supplier led" – i.e. long embedded practice led by the church and designed and delivered by the church authorities, to one that is "demand/user led" – i.e. those who wish to avail of this service do so at a time and in a manner that suits them, while those who do not wish to do so simply withdraw from the process.

In 2022, the Norwegian government introduced an offer of a 12-hour after-school programme for first graders. Municipalities are obliged to offer after-school arrangements during the school year. The arrangement is meant to be different from school and is also separate from the educational system. Within this context an option is provided for children who want to receive religious education within an after-school programme[viii].

In New Zealand the Education and Training Act 2020 specifies that a school does not need to allow religious instruction – there are no legal obligations to comply with[ix]. Teaching in state primary and intermediate schools must be secular while the school is open. Boards have the discretion to close their school, or part of the school, for up to one hour per week and no more than 20 hours per year to allow religious instruction. Religious instruction must be held on an opt-in basis requiring signed consent from a parent or caregiver.

In Canada, state funding for Catholic schools, provided for by law in several Canadian provinces, has led to entrenched discrimination, including in staff hiring practices and student admissions[x]. In addition, while students may theoretically opt out of mandatory religious instruction, the little-used process is made onerous through complex and demanding administrative requirements. An entrenched history of state sanctioned discriminatory practices has prevented many from seeing the violation of international human rights. Extending preferential treatment to members of certain religions while discriminating against others – including the nonreligious – is a kind of systemic faithism.

The HAI suggests matters could be improved by taking three simple steps:

- Make faith formation in schools available on an <u>opt-in</u> basis only, with the signed consent of a parent or caregiver.
- Provide faith formation outside of school hours only.
- Allow those with no interest in faith formation to simply absent themselves from the process.

The HAI believes that this would represent a better outcome for all.

End Notes

[i] https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpp5/census2022profile5-diversitymigrationethnicityirishtravellersreligion/keyfindings/
[ii] https://www.rte.ie/news/2024/0403/1441483-into-religion/
[iii] https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-41087035.html
[iv] https://catholiceducation.ie/understanding_living_ethos/
[v] https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/are-we-failing-non-roman-catholic-children-in-our-primary-schools-1.4690803
[vi] https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/cons/en/html#article44
[vii] https://ncca.ie/media/6000/faq-for-the-primary-curriculum-framework.pdf
[viii] https://cne.news/article/3660-norwegian-humanists-criticise-religious-education-after-school
[ix] https://assets.education.govt.nz/public/Uploads/Guidelines-on-religious-instruction-August2020.docx
[x] https://humanists.international/2023/04/humanist-ottawa-calls-on-canada-to-reject-systemic-faithism-in-a-submission-to-un/