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Title	'I will do it but religion is a very personal thing': teacher education applicants' attitudes towards teaching religion in Ireland
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Publication Date	2018-01-15
Publication Information	Heinz, Manuela, Davison, Kevin, & Keane, Elaine. (2018). 'I will do it but religion is a very personal thing': teacher education applicants' attitudes towards teaching religion in Ireland. <i>European Journal of Teacher Education</i> , 1-14. doi: 10.1080/02619768.2018.1426566
Publisher	Taylor & Francis
Link to publisher's version	https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2018.1426566
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/7104
DOI	http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2018.1426566

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‘I will do it but religion is a very personal thing’: Teacher education applicants’ attitudes towards teaching religion in Ireland

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Heinz, M., Davison, K., & Keane, E. (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*, 1-14. doi: [10.1080/02619768.2018.1426566](https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2018.1426566). Available at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02619768.2018.1426566>

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There has been extensive research internationally describing teachers’ homogenous socio-demographic backgrounds and critiquing the associated equity and diversity issues, most especially with regard to ethnicity and gender, and to a lesser extent, social class and disability. Yet, teachers’ religious affiliations and/or convictions have rarely been explored. Since ninety-six per cent of state primary schools in Ireland are denominational, considering religious diversity in teaching is both critically important and a complex undertaking. This paper examines primary initial teacher education applicants’ religiosity, and views of teaching religion, in Ireland. Our data suggest low levels of religious practice and religiosity among ITE applicants, many of whom would prefer to teach religion using a non-confessional approach. The paper raises critical questions regarding the experiences, constitutional rights and professional practice of increasingly secular and/or non-practicing Catholic teacher cohorts in a predominantly Catholic primary education system that has survived the trend towards progressive ‘unchurching’ of Europe.

Keywords: religion, initial teacher education, student teachers’ beliefs, diversity, Ireland

1. Introduction

Research and policy recommendations internationally, and in Ireland, have pointed to the need to diversify teaching populations with regard to ethnicity, social class background and dis/ability (Heinz, 2008; Heinz, Keane & Foley, 2017, Keane & Heinz, 2015, 2016; Keane, Heinz & Eaton, 2018; Schleicher, 2014). Yet, teachers' religious affiliations and/or convictions have rarely been explored (Heinz, 2011, 2013). Given the highly complex and historic interconnectedness of publicly funded education and religion characterising the Irish school system and the associated employment equality issues, a critical investigation of the religious affiliations and convictions of Ireland's teaching body is long overdue.

This paper explores the religious affiliations and religiosity of applicants and entrants to undergraduate primary (UG P) initial teacher education (ITE) programmes in Ireland. As such, for the 2014 ITE applicant cohort in Ireland, it will describe and discuss:

- 1) the composition of primary ITE applicants (entrants and non-entrants) in relation to their religious affiliations;
- 2) the religiosity (i.e. religious practice and beliefs) of primary ITE applicants (entrants and non-entrants); and
- 3) primary ITE applicants' attitudes towards the teaching of religion in Irish primary schools.

The paper represents the first large-scale investigation of religion in initial teacher education (ITE) in Ireland. It will interrupt the silence and invisibility of atheist, non-practicing Catholic and minority faith student and practicing teachers and highlight the

need to critically examine teaching and teacher education policy and practice, including access to ITE, ITE curricular and pedagogical spaces, school cultures and employment legislation, from a social justice perspective that includes a religious diversity dimension.

2. Religion and education in Ireland

For hundreds of years Catholicism in Ireland was systematically, and at times brutally, suppressed. Since Irish independence in 1922, however, the Republic has ‘devolved the public education function to schools owned and operated by religious denominations’ (Daly and Hickey, 2011, p. 3). Currently, ninety per cent of primary schools and over half of second-level schools in Ireland are Catholic (Coolahan, Hussey and F. Kilfeather, 2012; Lodge and Lynch 2004)¹. These state schools have mandatory religious instruction at all grade levels and are guided by an explicit Catholic ethos (Coolahan 1981/2004; O’Toole, 2015).

Ireland has become more religiously diverse through inward migration in recent decades, and while the number of those in Ireland identifying as non-religious is growing², there has been little accommodation from the overwhelmingly denominational education system. Even though the issue has been examined and numerous recommendations for change outlined by a Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector (Coolahan et al., 2012), little change to denominational

¹ In addition to this, five per cent of Irish primary schools are denominationally Church of Ireland (Protestant) (Lodge and Lynch 2004).

² In 1991 the number of people identifying as having ‘no religion’ in the national census was 66,270, by 2002, this number had grown to just over 138,000, to 173,000 in 2011 and to 468,400 (9.8% of population) in 2016 (O’Toole, 2015; Central Statistics Office, 2016).

schooling has resulted, apart from the introduction of a new religious education curriculum for *second-level* schools. The development and implementation of the religious education curriculum in *primary* schools remains the responsibility of the relevant patron bodies. As such:

The dominance of majority faith schools and the relative lack of alternatives for minority faith and non-faith groups has resulted in a situation whereby many children attend primary schools which do not reflect their own beliefs and, in fact, have a strong emphasis on socialisation into the majority faith (Faas, Darmody and Sokolowska, 2015, p. 7).

Ireland is, indeed, quite unique in the European context in the adoption of a ‘confessional’ approach to religious education (*ibid*). The Irish Constitution, or *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, while protecting religious equality broadly, does not guarantee a religiously neutral education, or religious freedom, to individual children (Irish Constitution, Article 44). Rather, as Daly (2009) notes:

... the pluralism guaranteed by the constitutional framework is of a very limited scope, operating in reality as a function of the power relations between religious groups. Its benefits are limited to those religious or non-religious groups which are sufficiently prevalent, in demographic terms, to muster the ‘critical mass’ or ‘appreciable number’ – not to mention the social capital or other resources – necessary to establish publicly funded schools (p. 237).

While education policy attempts to accommodate non-Catholic students by exempting them from religious education and instruction, the Irish Human Rights Commission has cautioned that: ‘unless Religion classes are moved outside of the school day, human rights standards suggest that it is necessary to put in place mechanisms to ensure supervision of children who wish to be exempted’ (IHRC, 2011, p. 100). However, the fact that Irish primary schools must, by law, teach an ‘integrated curriculum’ in which religion is integrated with other subjects (Faas et al., 2015) means

it is simply not possible to ensure the religious freedom of minorities in denominational schools. ‘Pulling’ students out of religious education furthermore poses additional challenges with regard to separation along religious and/or ethnic lines, which may result in ‘othering’ and discrimination (Evans, 2008).

Regarding the enrolment of non-Catholic students in Catholic schools, unless the school is undersubscribed, parents are asked to provide a Catholic Baptismal certificate and children are given preference in the enrolment process on the basis of their religious affiliation. Similarly, all teachers in Catholic primary schools are contractually required to obtain a Catholic Certificate in Religious Studies and to teach the Catholic religious education curriculum, which includes specific faith formation goals, despite the obvious conflict with freedom of thought, conscience and religion for those who may not share the same religious beliefs as the patron of the school. Furthermore, an exemption clause of the Irish Employment Equality Act³ (Section 37) allows religious-owned institutions (for example, schools and hospitals) to discriminate against employees or prospective employees if necessary to protect the religious ethos of the institution.⁴

The right of schools to religious ethos is, hence, an entitlement that overrides the right of students and teachers to freedom of conscience and the free practice and profession of religion (as guaranteed in the Irish Constitution, Article 44.2.1). It is with this concern about the absence of real religious choice/freedom in Irish education in mind that this research examines recent primary ITE applicants’ and entrants’ religious affiliations, religiosity, and attitudes toward teaching religious education.

³ Prohibits discrimination across nine grounds: age, gender, religion, race, sexual orientation, marital status, family status and membership of the Traveller community

⁴ In 2016, Section 37 was amended so that institutions are required to prove that a particular potential or actual employee threatens the school ethos in order to override equality provisions.

3. Research exploring teachers' religious backgrounds

What might teachers with non-Catholic or non-religious backgrounds contribute to Irish education? In France, education has been staunchly secular, and in many other European countries there has been either an 'opt-in' or 'opt-out' approach to religious education. In the United States of America, the First Amendment of the US Constitution permits and protects religious expression in schools. Teachers must however, in stark contrast to the Irish situation, remain neutral in the delivery of curriculum and are forbidden from promoting, and from prohibiting, any particular religious expression. This has created a certain degree of silence about religion in schools in the USA, and in the extant literature exploring the impact of the faith of teachers on their professional practice (White, 2009). However, to continue to ignore the religious identities of teachers contradicts the widely accepted understanding that learning is made more meaningful when it is connected to the real lives of students (Middleton, 2002; Tatto, 1996).

Additionally, research on the religious backgrounds of American teachers suggests that religion matters. It often influences the choice to go into teaching – some state that a call to teach arises from faith – and that it influences teaching strategies (White, 2010). Hartwick's research found that teachers who had a strong religious background tended to value teaching from the textbook more than active teaching and learning approaches because of their experience of scripture being taught to them in a transmission approach, which in turn fostered a hierarchical relationship with knowledge and authority (Hartwick, 2015).

It was also found that teachers from minority religious faiths tended to have a greater understanding of being marginalised, and that they believed that they were in a better position to teach about social justice and critical thinking (White, 2010). In a country with secular education such as the USA, arguments are being made which

suggest that teachers ‘who omit religious content and understanding from their classrooms may inhibit students’ opportunities to learn about traditions that differ from their own’ (White, 2010, p. 54). The absence of research about the religious beliefs of teachers in Ireland may be a result of the taken for granted assumption that teachers, especially primary teachers, are overwhelmingly from Irish Catholic backgrounds, and cannot enter the profession without having taken and passed a specific suite of religious studies courses that enable them to teach the requisite religious teaching component.

In the United States as well as in Europe, as ‘racial and ethnic demographics continue to change, schools will face challenges, and will need to find new opportunities to help students of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds to succeed’ (Subedi, 2006, p. 228). Irish research has raised concerns with regard to the striking lack of diversity in the teaching profession which may result in teachers not being able to make connections to students’ lives, or prior learning (Darmody and Smyth, 2016).

Denominational schooling needs to be problematized in this context as it may, indeed, not only form a barrier to teacher diversity but, furthermore, restrict teacher professional agency with regard to providing inclusive learning spaces for children (Gellel and Buchanan, 2011; INTO, 2003). As emphasised by Richardson (2008), denominational schooling can hinder the ability to build trust between communities. In Ireland, the vast majority of primary students and teachers are experiencing confessional religious education on a daily basis. This paper explores the position and beliefs of (student) teachers who find themselves in a predominantly denominational, mostly Catholic, education system which has successfully avoided the European-wide trend towards progressive secularisation or ‘unchurching’ (Casanova, 2004).

3. Methodology

Our main data collection method is an anonymous voluntary cross-sectional online⁵ questionnaire implemented annually with applicants to all state-funded ITE programmes across Ireland (Keane & Heinz, 2015). To merge questionnaire data collected from applicants at the pre-offer stage with application data containing application outcomes (received from the Central Applications Office), we developed a system based on a hashed algorithm that tracks applicants to entrants in an anonymised fashion. In this paper, we present findings from our 2014 survey implementation which achieved response rates of 43% of primary ITE applicants (N=1,042⁶), 50% of entrants (530) and 37% (N=536) of non-entrants.

The Diversity in Initial Teacher Education (DITE) questionnaire includes eight items to explore religious affiliations, religiosity and attitudes towards teaching religion. The Census categories have been adapted to explore respondents' religious affiliations and additional space is provided for respondents to provide comments/explanations and/or religions not listed. A number of items have been adapted from the European Values Survey (EVS, 2010) to explore frequency of attendance at religious services, frequencies of religious practice and religiosity. Three Likert Scale items and one open-ended item explore respondents' attitudes towards teaching religion in primary schools.

⁵ We use Survey Monkey as the platform for our questionnaire.

⁶ For the purposes of this analysis, we included only those primary ITE applicants who had listed a relevant ITE programme as their first preference (for both applicants and non-entrants) as we felt a first preference demonstrated significant motivation to progress to an ITE programme. We included all entrants, irrespective of where in the list of 10 preferences their ITE programme was placed.

Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) for Windows (version 23). A number of statistical tests were performed, including frequency tests, multiple response tables, chi-square tests of independence, and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to explore significant differences among groups. For 2x2 crosstabulations (df=1), the chi-square values reported are the Yates' chi-square, corrected for continuity. For larger than 2x2 contingency tables, Pearson chi-square values and standardised residuals are reported with z-scores of more than ± 1.96 indicating significance at the 5% level.

Responses to the open-ended question exploring applicants' attitudes towards teaching religion were analysed thematically. Depending on the number of different arguments/viewpoints provided in respondents' answers, individual responses were recorded under one or more themes. Subsequent to the detailed thematic analysis, responses were also grouped into six broader categories reflecting respondents' overall attitudes towards teaching religion as part of their teaching role.

4. Findings

4.1. Religious affiliations of ITE applicants and entrants

In 2014, 88.9% of applicants and 90.4% of entrants identified as Roman Catholic compared to 78.3% of the general population. 3.1% of applicants compared to 2.6% of the overall population declared their affiliation with the Church of Ireland. It is notable that there were no members of the Muslim community, the third biggest religious group recorded in Ireland (1.3% of the overall population), represented in the primary ITE entrant sample. The proportion of ITE applicants and entrants affiliated with Presbyterianism reflect those in the general population (0.5%). Finally, 6.3% of applicants and 4.8% of entrants compared to 9.8% of the general population stated that

they had no religion (Central Statistics Office, 2016) (see overview in Table 1).

Chi-square tests were performed to test for significant differences between ITE applicant cohorts and the general Irish population as well as between ITE entrants and non-entrants. The small number of respondents declaring affiliations with religions other than Catholicism restricted our analysis. Concentrating on comparisons of the participation rates of Catholics, as well as of those declaring that they had no religion, we detected a significant overrepresentation of Roman Catholics ($\chi^2(1, n=4,761,970,4)=46.03, p=.0001$, Cramer's $V=0.001$) and a significant underrepresentation of non-religious individuals in the ITE respondent cohorts ($\chi^2(1, n=4,761,970,4)=9.81, p=.0017$, Cramer's $V=0.0005$) compared to the general Irish population⁷. There was no significant difference in the UG P entrant compared to the non-entrant cohort, $\chi^2(2, n=722)=3.41, p=0.181$ with regard to religious affiliation (Catholic, Other, None).

Table 1: Religious Affiliation of 2014 Undergraduate Primary ITE cohorts (%)

Rel. Affiliation	Undergraduate Primary ITE		
	<i>Applicants</i>	<i>Entrants</i>	<i>Non-Entrants</i>
Roman Catholic	88.9	90.4	86.5
Church of Ireland	3.1	3.7	2.9
Presbyterian	0.4	0.5	0.6
Methodist	0.1	0	0.3
Islam	0.1	0	0.3
Judaism	0	0	0
Buddhism	0	0	0

⁷ Chi-square results for all applicants compared to general Irish population, Census 2016.

Hinduism	0.1	0	0.3
Other*	0.9	0.5	1.1
None	6.3	4.8	8.0
N	704	374	348
* 1 Agnostic, 1 Spiritual rather than religious, 1 Technically Roman Catholic but very disillusioned with the Church and doubting religions in general [...]			

4.2. Religious attendance and religious practice

Respondents were asked to estimate how often, apart from events such as weddings and funerals, they attended religious services. Results indicate that just under half of primary ITE applicants and entrants attend religious services at least once a week with a further 16-18% attending religious services once a month. 7.9% of applicants and 5.5% of entrants indicated that they never attended religious services with the remaining proportions attending religious services only very occasionally (see detailed results in Table 2).

Chi-square tests, using the collapsed categories ‘once a week or more’, ‘once a month’, ‘less than once a month’, ‘never’, indicated significantly higher levels of religious attendance among UG P entrants compared to non-entrants ($\chi^2(3, n=692)=12.99, p=.005$, Cramer’s $V=0.14$). Chi-square tests using the collapsed categories ‘once a week or more’, ‘once a month’, ‘less than once a month to never’ indicated no significant difference between the attendance levels of Catholic ITE applicants compared to applicants with other religious backgrounds ($\chi^2(2, n=624)=3.25, p=0.20$).

Responses to the question ‘How often do you practice your religion outside religious services’ showed that just under half (48.2%) of all UG P applicants practiced

their religion once a week or more. Twenty per cent of applicants indicated that they practiced their religion once a month or several times a year with the remaining 31.8% engaging in religious practice less often or never. Chi-square tests indicated no significant difference in religious practice levels (‘once a week or more’, once a month/several times a year’, ‘less often/never’) of Catholic applicants compared to applicants with other religious backgrounds, $\chi^2(2, n=624)=3.41, p=0.18$.

Table 2: Primary ITE Cohorts’ Attendance at Religious Services (%)

Religious Attendance	Applicants	Entrants	Non-Entrants	Catholic Applicants	Other Religion Applicants
More than once a week	1.6	1.1	2.0	1.3	6.1
Once a week	42.3	47.0	39.0	46.2	27.3
Once a month	16.5	17.8	14.8	17.2	18.2
Only on specific holidays	24.6	21.6	26.7	23.9	36.4
Once a year	3.6	2.7	4.4	3.2	0
Less than once a year	2.3	3.3	1.5	1.8	0
Never or practically never	7.9	5.5	10.5	5.0	12.1
Don’t know	1.2	1.1	1.2	1.3	0
N	692	366	344	599	33

4.3. Religiosity

Respondents were asked if they considered themselves to be a religious person (58.12%), not a religious person (24.5%), or a convinced atheist (1.4%). Interestingly, 16% of applicants as well as entrants stated that they didn’t know. Levels of religiosity

of entrants did not differ significantly from those of non-entrants ($\chi^2(2, n=710)=1.59, p=0.45$). Similarly, religiosity of Catholic applicants did not significantly differ to that of applicants with other religious backgrounds, $\chi^2(2, n=635)=1.25, p=0.26$.⁸

Table 3: Religiosity of Primary ITE Cohorts (%)

Religiosity	Applicants	Entrants	Non-Entrants	Catholic Applicants	Other Religion Applicants
A religious person	58.2	60.1	57.0	62.8	51.5
Not a religious person	24.5	23.5	25.3	22.1	27.3
A convinced atheist	1.4	0.3	2.6	0.7	3.0
Don't know	15.9	16.1	15.1	14.5	18.2
N	694	366	344	602	33

4.4. Attitudes towards teaching religion in primary school

Catholics indicated significantly higher levels of appreciation for the importance of passing on Catholic values to children in primary schools than was the case for applicants with other religious affiliations or no religion ($F(2, 659)=23.98, p=.000, \eta^2=0.068$) (see mean scores for Likert-scale items in Table 4). However, it is interesting to note that even Catholic respondents rated the relevant Likert-scale item just above the scale midpoint, indicating a neutral rather than affirmative attitude towards the role of the teacher in providing Catholic education. Similarly, the ratings of respondents with 'other' or 'no religion', while significantly lower than those of their Catholic

⁸ To satisfy assumption of minimum cell count, categories were collapsed into 'a religious person', 'not a religious person/a convinced atheist/'don't know'.

counterparts, were close to the scale midpoint.

In contrast, respondents from all religious and non-religious groups indicated high levels of support for the teaching about different faiths/world views/religions. Finally, respondents of all groups appeared to generally disagree with the suggestion that their beliefs about religion (either as a believer or non-believer) would have an influence on their approach to teaching.

Table 4: Undergraduate Primary ITE Applicants' Attitudes towards Teaching Religion

Survey Statement	UG P Applicants by Religious Affiliation	Mean	SD	N
As a primary teacher in Ireland I feel it is important to pass on Catholic values and beliefs to children in my care.	Roman Catholic	4.18**	1.77	585
	Other Religion	3.06**	1.99	31
	No Religion	2.44**	1.53	43
Primary teachers should teach children about different faiths/world views/religions.	Roman Catholic	6.09	1.43	586
	Other Religion	5.93	1.80	31
	No Religion	6.24	1.21	42
I think that my beliefs about religion (either as a believer or non-believer) will have an influence on my approach to teaching.	Roman Catholic	3.17	1.90	587
	Other Religion	3.03	1.83	31
	No Religion	2.49	1.64	43
Survey question "Rate agreement on 7 point scale from 1 "not at all" to 7 "extremely" ** p < 0.01				

An open-ended item asked respondents how they felt about teaching religion as part of their teaching role. Interestingly, there was a high non-response rate to this item (24.5%) possibly indicating that a significant proportion of ITE applicants felt uncomfortable to disclose their personal thoughts regarding the requirement for primary teachers to teach religion.

Table 5 provides an overview of the most frequently recurring themes/statements emerging from the thematic analysis. A high number of very short responses merely indicating that respondents felt that teaching religion was ‘no problem’, ‘o.k.’, or that they ‘didn’t mind’ may indicate high levels of discomfort even among those ITE applicants who did provide responses. Interestingly, the second most frequently recurring theme related to respondents’ wish to, or acknowledgement of the importance of, educating children about all religions with many responses falling into this category also emphasizing that Ireland is a multi-cultural society, that children should make up their own minds and/or that religion should not be taught in a biased way.

Table 5: Recurring statements/themes in responses (N=592) to question:

“How do you feel about teaching religion as part of your teaching role?” (N)

No problem/o.k./do not mind	179
Educate about/consider all/other religions	114
Important (important part of education/culture, the curriculum, important to be aware of religion, important to teach about beliefs and faith)	104
Happy to teach religion	73
Comfortable	30
Inform decision about personal belief/children to make up their own mind	28
Positive/good	27
Can't/shouldn't force belief/everyone is entitled to their own opinion	25
O.k. if not forcing	24
Outside school	23
Part of the job	21
Teach/promote tolerance, morality (right and wrong) through religion	21
Agree	18

Don't agree, not necessary	17
Indifferent, don't know, uncertain	16
Willing (even though not very religious), if necessary will do	15
Faith important	13
Only if all religions are considered	12
Important to teach religious values	10

Following the initial thematic analysis, responses were also grouped into six broader categories reflecting respondents' attitudes towards teaching religion overall: 1) agreeing with teaching religion; 2) complying with teaching religion; 3) wanting to teach all religions; 4) having mixed feelings about teaching religion; 5) disagreeing with teaching religion; and 6) being indifferent or unsure about teaching religion (see table 6). Fewer than half of those who provided responses (35%) indicated overall agreement with teaching religion as part of the primary teachers' role. Most answers falling into this category were very short with respondents merely stating that they felt it was 'important', that they were 'happy', that they 'agreed' with it etc. Only very few respondents elaborated on their positive views as demonstrated in the examples below:

Ireland is a religious Christian country and I think religion should be a part of education.

It's important for the morals of students.

I will take my role seriously and encourage religious beliefs.

One quarter of respondents (24%) to the question used more neutral language to describe their feelings indicating their compliance with rather than support of teaching religion by stating that:

If its part of the school ethos then its part of my job.

Fine, it is part of the curriculum.

If I have to I will, I don't mind.

About one in five respondents (19%) described positive feelings about teaching 'all religions' either directly or indirectly by describing their support of teaching religion 'in an unbiased way' or teaching religion 'to help students make up their own minds'.

I believe it is important as although my beliefs on religion are at a stand still people should still all know about their religion and religions from around the world.

It is important knowledge for students to obtain, especially to learn about different beliefs and prevent racism based on religious values.

I am willing to teach religion in a fair and unbiased manner, while respecting the fact that many students may follow different religions to myself, if any.

About one in ten respondents expressed overall disagreement and/or were critical about teaching religion as part of their teaching role stating that they 'didn't agree', that they 'wouldn't like to do it', that they 'wouldn't feel comfortable', that it was 'less relevant nowadays' or 'not fair' to students of minority religious backgrounds.

A further ten per cent of respondents expressed mixed feeling about teaching religion as part of their teaching role indicating their agreement or compliance alongside negative or critical points. Similar to those indicating their outright disagreement, many responses in this 'mixed' category problematized the one-sided (or biased) nature of religious education in Ireland as illustrated by the examples below:

Fine, although it would not be respectful to teach religion to atheists or other religions in Ireland today.

I don't agree that it should be compulsory but I will teach it if I have to.

I do think it should be taught, but I think I would not be completely comfortable teaching the one sided view of religion that is currently present.

Some religion is all right to teach, but I don't believe in shoving religious beliefs down someone's throat.

Finally, a few respondents (3%) indicated that they were ‘indifferent’ or that they ‘didn’t know’ how they felt about teaching religion.

Table 6: Primary ITE applicants’ responses to the open-ended question “*How do you feel about teaching religion as part of your teaching role?*” categorised (%)

Category	Description	%
Agreeing with teaching religion as part of their teaching role	Responses indicate overall agreement (feeling happy/good about, considering teaching of religion important) with teaching religion as part of teaching role.	35%
Complying with teaching religion as part of their teaching role	Responses point toward a compliant rather than positive attitude toward teaching religion as part of their teaching role expressed through statements like: don’t mind, no problem, fine, okay, grand, doesn’t bother me, willing, no issues, part of the job.	24%
Wanting to teach about <u>all</u> religions	Responses indicate positive attitudes towards teaching about all world religions and/or religious values more broadly. Some responses stress importance of tolerance, equal treatment and/or of children making up their own minds with regard to religious beliefs.	19%
Having mixed feelings (Agreeing or complying + disagreeing or being critical)	Responses include positive/compliant as well as negative/critical statements. For example, respondents may state that they agree, are ok, that it is important, or that they don’t mind <u>BUT</u> that all religions should be taught, that they will teach it as long as nobody is forced, that they would rather not but know it is easier to get a job if they are willing to teach religion.	10%
Disagreeing/being critical of teaching religion	Responses are negative and/or critical indicating that respondents are not comfortable, wouldn’t like it, consider it not fair to those with other religious beliefs, don’t agree, think it should be taught outside school, that religion is personal, less relevant nowadays.	9%
Being indifferent or unsure	Responses indicate that respondents are indifferent / have no opinion or that they don’t know/are unsure.	3%

<i>Total</i>		<i>(N=592)</i>
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Discussion

The Diversity in Initial Teacher Education study addresses the data vacuum with regard to ITE cohorts' religious affiliations, religious practice, and attitudes towards religious education in primary schools in Ireland. Our findings indicate that Roman Catholics are significantly overrepresented while those stating that they have no religion are underrepresented in primary ITE cohorts compared to the overall population. In addition, our data for the ITE entrant cohort shows a complete lack of individuals from minority-religious backgrounds, most notably from the fastest growing religious group, Islam.

It is likely that these patterns of over and under-representation are, at least partially, a result of the predominantly denominational (90% Catholic) Irish primary school system acting as a barrier or deterrent for many minority or non-religious individuals who may have an interest in but decide against pursuing a primary teaching career fearing that it would require them to change or abandon their religious beliefs or practice or to repudiate or dissent within their religious affiliation. While this article has focused on ITE cohorts' religious backgrounds only it is important to highlight that denominational schooling may, indeed, be a contributing factor to the underrepresentation of minority ethnic as well as non-heterosexual individuals in (student) teacher populations also given the intersections between religion and these socio-demographic variables (Heinz, Keane & Davison, 2017; Keane & Heinz, 2016).

Our nuanced analysis of religious attendance, participation and religiosity signals that a significant proportion of ITE applicants rarely or never attend religious services and/or practice their religion (32-35%). Indeed, just 58% of our respondents

considered themselves ‘a religious person’. Catholic religious instruction received little support, even from Catholic ITE applicants, with those from other or no religious backgrounds generally expressing moderate levels of disagreement. In contrast, all respondents (from Catholic, other religious and non-religious backgrounds) were strongly in favour of teaching children about all faiths/world views/religions’.

A high non-response rate to the open-ended item probing respondents to express their feelings about teaching religion may indicate discomfort on behalf of ITE applicants to disclose their personal views about the predominantly denominational Irish primary school system. We also noted a relatively widespread tendency of complying with (rather than endorsing or rejecting) the teaching of religion with many stating that it ‘is part of the job’ and ‘doesn’t bother them’. It may be that enculturation into Catholic education and possibly positive experiences and memories of ‘no harm’ have led many to uncritically accept the status quo? Or, alternatively, it may be that many of those considering and/or entering the teaching profession feel that they have no choice in the matter; that they need to comply and be prepared to take on the role of religion teacher if they want to succeed – even if they are not religious themselves, do not practice or believe?

While according to the Irish Constitution, Article 44.2.1, every citizen is guaranteed freedom of conscience and the free practice and profession of religion, (student) teachers who are not Catholics (or non-practicing Catholics) are clearly in a situation where being openly true to their personal beliefs could jeopardise their employment opportunities. For them, the freedom of choice may therefore rather lie in deciding whether, or not, they would be prepared to change or ‘fake’ religious beliefs to gain secure employment. Clearly, such a decision might have very serious implications for some if their actions were viewed as apostasy. In addition, how may ‘faking’

religious beliefs or feeling a ‘fraud’ impact on teachers’ conscience, morality and professional integrity in the longer term?

Conclusion

While there has been much debate about the compatibility of publicly funded denominational schools with growing religious pluralism and secularism in Ireland, and internationally, these debates have, so far, mostly focused on equity of access to state-run schools and freedom of religion and conscience for children and their families (Faas et al. 2015). The position of *teachers* in a predominantly denominational primary school system has received much less attention in academic and policy discourse.

In light of the findings presented in this paper it is clear that the prospect and experience of entering a third level learning and future professional space that is permeated by a religious, predominantly Catholic, ethos will cause conflict between personal beliefs and professional requirements for many potential and actual ITE applicants and entrants. This situation will most likely result in some highly motivated and suitable individuals who are atheist, non-practicing Catholics or from a minority religious background deciding against a career in teaching. Those who enter ITE despite the considerable religious barriers may experience significant, and likely unforeseen, difficulties throughout their ITE and professional careers due to tensions between their personal and professional lives. It is time to ask whether it is fair, ethical or moral to put individuals who are committed to the education of our children in this difficult situation?

The Diversity in Initial Teacher Education (DITE) study interrupts the silence and invisibility of non-religious, non-practicing Catholic and minority faith (student) teachers and highlights the need to critically examine teaching and teacher education policy and practice, including access to ITE, ITE and school cultures and employment

legislation, from a social justice perspective that includes a religious diversity dimension. The insights offered here with regard to the religious backgrounds and beliefs of (student) teachers in Ireland highlight that authentic commitment to teacher diversity, and equality in education and society more broadly, needs to be underpinned by a readiness and determination to critically interrogate some long-standing (and historically rooted) structures and cultural practices of the Irish education system.

Funding

This work was supported by the Irish Research Council under Research Project Grant (RPG2013-1, Starter RPG).

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