

Review

# Religious Education in the Early Years: An Irish Perspective

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**Abstract:** Ireland's education system at primary level is renowned for its lack of diversity, with most schools falling under the patronage of the Catholic Church. This homogeneity of school type is problematic from a number of perspectives, not least the changed demographics in terms of religious affiliation in Ireland. There is a desire for change by all; however, the pace of change is slow. Whilst the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) determines the curriculum for all subject areas in primary schools, this body has no remit over the subject of religious education (RE). The responsibility for the provision of RE has rested with the patrons of schools since the inception of the national school system. This review focuses on the provision of early years' Catholic RE in schools and pre-schools in the Republic of Ireland. In recent years, the importance afforded to the subject of RE and its status in schools has been eroded. The impact on early childhood religious education of this diminution is outlined. The review also addresses the training and support of teachers to work in the Catholic school sector and concurs with other writers in the field that current programmes of preparation require reform.

**Keywords:** early years' religious education; Aistear; initial teacher education; Catholic RE

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this review is to describe the context of Catholic religious education (CRE) in early years' education in the Republic of Ireland. It seeks to address a gap in the literature by providing an overview of the continuum from pre-school to early years' primary school provision in this domain. It is envisaged that this outline and the content that it covers may prompt further scholarly explorations.

The review will begin by providing a very brief overview of the Irish population in terms of religious affiliation. Although incomplete as a portrait, it is hoped that it will be sufficient to offer some context for readers who are unfamiliar with the Irish religious landscape. Next, the review will address the provision of early childhood education in Ireland, encompassing both pre-school and primary school contexts. It contains a description of the history and status of early childhood education in primary schools and in pre-school settings. It offers an overview of the landscape of Irish primary schools and the dominance of Catholic schools in that sector. Then, the discipline of religious education (RE) in early childhood education is examined, with a particular focus on Catholic religious education (CRE). It uncovers the contentious space occupied by the discipline of RE in primary education in Ireland. Finally, the article moves on to address the training and support of educators working in early years' education in Ireland. It recognises the need for change in how such educators are prepared for and sustained in their professional practice and suggests a shift towards more contemplative and experiential forms of engagement for primary school teachers in particular. The review concludes with a restatement of the current context and a realistic outlook on the future of Catholic RE in the early years of children's lives.



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## 2. The Religious Landscape of the Republic of Ireland

Ireland's identity in the past was synonymous with Catholicism, and although Catholicism is still the majority religion in the country, a lot has changed. Renowned sociologist Tom Inglis, writing in 2017, says:

There was a time, not long ago, when the Republic of Ireland was a homogeneous society and culture. The vast majority of the people were white, English-speaking and Catholic. Over the last fifty years, the cultural map of the country has changed dramatically. Ireland has become a multi-national, cosmopolitan, globalised society. There has been a shift in the balance of institutional cultural power away from the Catholic Church towards the state, the market and the media. (Inglis 2017, p. 21).

The most recent census statistics which are available, indicate that Ireland remains a predominantly Catholic country in terms of population, with 78.3 percent of people identifying as Roman Catholic (CSO 2016). However, this is a sharp fall from 84.2 percent in 2011 and indicates a steady demise in traditional Irish Catholicism where the 'monopoly religion of Catholicism has broken down and no longer commands widespread adherence' (Ganiel 2016, p. 2). There are multiple factors which have contributed to these figures, foremost among them the declining moral authority of the Catholic Church as a result of institutional abuse of women and clerical child sexual abuse scandals (Hogan 2019; Corless 2021; Scally 2021). Other factors include economic growth, social liberalisation, attenuated religious socialisation, and the Church's lingering influence in social institutions (Turpin 2022, p. 1).

Evidence of disaffection from Catholic Church teaching can be found in two watershed moments of Ireland's recent history. In 2015, Ireland became the first country in the world to enshrine marriage equality in its constitution and the first to legalise same-sex marriage by popular vote (a majority of 62 percent voted in favour of its legalisation). Then, in 2018, the repeal of the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution, which guaranteed the right to life of the unborn child and prohibited abortion in all but the most restrictive circumstances, was voted for by a majority vote of 66.4 percent.

Ireland's population now embraces a variety of religious and secular perspectives, and it is simultaneously undergoing religious diversification and secularisation (Ganiel 2016). The fastest-growing religions between 2011 and 2016 in percentage terms were Orthodox, Hindu, and Muslim. However, those ticking the 'No Religion' box account for 9.8 percent of the total population (an increase of almost four percent from 2011), and this cohort now represents the second largest category in the Census data on religion (CSO 2016). An interesting statistic from the perspective of catering to early childhood education is the age bracket within which most parents of young children sit, i.e., those aged 20–39 years. Of that cohort, 45 percent fall into the category of identifying as having no religion.

## 3. Early Childhood Education in Ireland

Compulsory formal school attendance in primary schools in Ireland is required from age six; however, children are eligible to commence school at the start of the school year if they have reached the age of four by that September. As such, early childhood education in Ireland encompasses both pre-school settings and infant classes in primary schools. Before addressing the specific curricular focus of RE, it is necessary to glean an understanding of the landscape of early years' education contexts in Ireland. An overview of the patronage model of education at primary level is first described, and its inherent challenges are outlined. Then a consideration of the pre-school context is offered. Finally, the continuum between the two distinct sectors, pre-school and primary is addressed by considering the early childhood curriculum framework.

### 3.1. Primary School Context of Early Childhood Education

Ireland's primary school system is dominated by schools with a Catholic ethos. There are currently 3104 Catholic primary schools, representing 89 percent of all schools at that

level (DES 2022). The near monopoly of Catholic primary schools in Ireland is a product of Ireland's history and the belief systems of the Irish population (Coolahan et al. 2012, p. 1). Ireland's primary schools were set up in 1831 as part of a national school system, which was state supported. The state had minimal involvement in the provision of primary schools, opting instead to delegate the establishment, ownership, and management of schools to private patrons. The original intention expressed in the founding document, the Stanley Letter, was that all primary schools would be interdenominational in character (Renehan 2014, p. 13). The aspiration was that such interdenominational schools would fall under the patronage or trusteeship of joint Catholic/Protestant religious ethos rather than one patron alone. However, by the turn of the twentieth century, this aspiration had failed and the national school system had become de facto denominational, with the vast majority of schools under the control of patrons of one particular denomination, Catholic or Protestant in the main (Renehan 2014, p. 20).

This situation of almost exclusive denominational patronage at primary level continued until 1978 when the first multi-denominational school was set up. This was followed in subsequent years by more such schools under the patronage of Educate Together, which is currently the patron of ninety-six primary schools. Multi-denominational schools uphold, respect, and accept equality of beliefs, whether religious or non-religious (NCCA 2015, p. 9). They do not provide RE as formation during the school day but do provide education about religions and beliefs. In these schools, parents may arrange for denominational RE outside of school hours. Another patron body, An Foras Pátrúnachta, was recognised in 1993 and has governance of seventy-four primary schools; among them are denominational, multi-denominational, and interdenominational schools, which teach through the medium of the Irish language. Community National Schools, the first state schools at primary level, were established in 2008. There are twenty-eight such schools at the primary level and their ethos is multi-denominational.

In the last five years, twenty-seven new mainstream primary schools have opened. All of these schools are multi-denominational in ethos, spread over various patrons. Despite these developments, Catholic schools still comprise the vast majority of primary schools and the need for greater diversity of schools is recognised by all. In tandem with the establishment of new schools, a reconfiguration process is also currently taking place. This involves existing Catholic primary schools divesting their patronage to another patron. The current programme for government has committed to increasing the percentage of multi-denominational schools from its present share of 5 percent of all primary schools, to 13 percent (400 schools) by the year 2030. Such transfers of patronage are difficult to navigate and progress is slow. At its current pace, it is predicted that just half of the government's target will be achieved (Mc Graw and Tiernan 2022, p. 295).

### 3.2. Pre-School Education

There was little focus on pre-school education in Ireland until the late 1980s and 1990s, since the majority of mothers did not work outside the home until that period (Flood and Hardy 2013). Both the Child Care Act (Department of Health and Children 1991) and Ireland signing up to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992 represent important junctures for the country in terms of supporting children in early childhood (NCCA 2004). In 1996, a White Paper on Early Childhood Education: Ready to Learn was published (DES 1996), and it committed to providing high-quality education in the early years before formal schooling. This was followed in 2000 by the provision of a national policy framework for children's overall development, Our Children—Their Lives: National Children's Strategy, 2000–2010 (Department of Health and Children 2000). Public concern about the quality of some of what was available in pre-school settings ushered in further major initiatives for improvement (Murphy 2015). In 2006, a national quality framework for early childhood education was produced. This quality framework is called *Síolta*, the Irish word for 'seeds'. *Síolta* aims to define, assess and support the improvement of quality across all aspects of practices in informal early childhood settings

(e.g., full and part-time day care, child-minders, crèches, pre-schools) for children aged 0–6 (CEDEC 2006).

With the introduction of two years of universal state-funded pre-school provision in 2010, expanded in 2018, the number of four-year-olds remaining in pre-school settings has increased (DES 2022, p. 10) In 2001, 46 percent of children starting school were four years old. By 2021, just 17 percent of children were four years old. This is significant in terms of Catholic education because of the dearth of involvement on the part of the Catholic Church in pre-school provision in the Republic of Ireland.

### 3.3. *Aistear: Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*

In 2009, an early childhood curriculum framework entitled *Aistear*, the Irish word for journey, was published (NCCA 2009). The *Aistear* curriculum framework is relevant to all settings where 0–6-year old children are present. It straddles both pre-school and infant classes in primary schools and marks the first time pre-school and primary children have been considered together in a learning continuum. It addresses learning in a holistic manner ‘intricately interweaving domains of social, emotional, personal, physical (sensory and motor), cognitive, linguistic, creative, aesthetic, moral, and spiritual development, and the whole system of learning processes all of which influence each other in highly complex and sophisticated ways’ (NCCA 2004, p. 21).

*Aistear* proposes four interconnected themes, which contribute to learning and development in the early years:

- Well-being;
- Identity and Belonging;
- Communicating;
- Exploring and Thinking.

These themes are addressed through the implementation of effective early childhood pedagogies rooted in a socio-cultural approach that honours children’s agency, e.g., small group teaching, a balance between teacher-initiated activity and child-initiated activity, use of the environment as a site for learning, flexible timetable, talk and discussion (Dunphy 2008). The pedagogies of play and story are also paramount in early years’ education (Baker et al. 2021; Huth et al. 2021; Kerry-Moran and Aerila 2019).

Teachers in infant classes in primary schools (junior and senior infants) express challenges to the implementation of *Aistear* alongside the revised Primary School Curriculum (DES 1999) at infant standard (Level 1) with its discrete subjects (Gray and Ryan 2016). While *Aistear* focuses on the development of attitudes, values, and learning dispositions, the Primary School Curriculum (PSC) centres on the acquisition of subject-based knowledge and the development of age-appropriate skills. Whereas time is delineated for subject development in the PSC, no such allocation is present within *Aistear*. These challenges may subside as the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment introduces its new curriculum for primary schools, which seeks to ensure greater continuity in children’s experiences and progression in their learning as they move from pre-school settings into primary school. However, larger class sizes in infant classes are also an impediment to child-centred learning approaches in primary schools (Murphy 2015).

## 4. Early Childhood Religious Education in Ireland

This section addresses the provision of ECRE, beginning with the primary school context, where it outlines the current status of the broader discipline of RE before moving on to address Catholic RE specifically. It then addresses pre-school settings.

### 4.1. *Religious Education at Primary School Level*

Religious education has occupied a privileged position in the Irish primary school curriculum since the inception of the national school system (Hession 2015; Renehan 2014). Indeed, one of the rules for National Schools, Rule 68, stated that ‘Of all parts of a school curriculum, Religious Instruction is by far the most important’. When Rule 68 was

introduced in 1965, the faith profile of school populations was relatively homogenous with regard to religion. Approximately 94.4 percent of the population was Catholic, 3.5 percent were Church of Ireland, 1.1 percent were other Protestant denominations and other stated religions, 1.6 percent did not state their religion or world view, and 0.15 percent of the population stated that they had no religion (figures based on an average of statistics from 1961 and 1971, cited in [CSO \(2016\)](#)). It was unlikely therefore that there were objections to the subject of religious instruction that was delivered at that time in primary schools.

In the early twenty-first century, however, the ‘mis-match between the inherited pattern of denominational school patronage and the rights of citizens in the much more culturally and religiously diverse contemporary Irish society’ could not be ignored ([Coolahan et al. 2012](#), p. 1). Reforms were sought in the areas of divestment, admissions, and curriculum ([Mc Graw and Tiernan 2022](#), p. 21). As mentioned above, the divestment process is ongoing and the previously held entitlement of Catholic schools to prioritise Catholic children in their admissions policies (the so-called ‘baptism barrier’) was withdrawn in 2018. With regard to the curriculum, the primary concern of reformers was to ‘reduce or eliminate the role of religion in the school curriculum and school experience’ (*ibid.*, p. 21). Such calls for reform did not take proper account of developments in the field of Catholic RE in Ireland. [Kennedy and Cullen \(2021\)](#) speak of religious education in Ireland as often being caricatured in a binary sense, e.g., denominational and non-denominational (p. 2). This caricature is frequently taken a step further with the presentation of denominational RE as being indoctrinatory and non-denominational RE as being progressive and neutral ([Teach Don’t Preach 2019](#)). It appears that many in Ireland are still subscribing to a ‘tired debate’ ([Groome 2019](#), p. 16) between catechesis and religious education. Groome poses catechesis and Catholic RE as ‘faith education on a shared continuum’ rather than categorically separated enterprises (p. 16). The image of a continuum or spectrum is helpful, particularly at the stage of early childhood where young children learn holistically and experientially ([Dunphy 2008](#)). The challenge for religious educators is to develop appropriate approaches to religious education that are effective in terms of meeting the needs and rights of pupils in a democratic pluralistic society ([Kennedy and Cullen 2021](#)).

The status of the discipline of RE in primary schools has diminished in recent years and the rescinding of Rule 68 in 2016 offers one example of this diminution. A further example can be found in one of the proposals contained in the Draft Curriculum Framework for Primary Schools ([NCCA 2020](#)). The status of RE at the time was one of seven core subject areas of the Primary School Curriculum ([NCCA 1999](#)), but in the draft curriculum, it was proposed that RE would no longer be a core part of the curriculum, instead being consigned to ‘flexible time’, which includes roll-call, breaks, and recreation ([NCCA 2023](#), p. 29). However, this proposal was not implemented in the recently launched framework, and RE is named as a curricular area (*ibid.*, p. 15). Unfortunately, the documentation contains contradictory images and narratives, suggesting that the final document requires further editing for clarification purposes. The hours allocated to RE (currently 2.5 h per week) is reduced by half an hour in the new framework. The term ‘Patron’s Programme’, which is already used in common parlance, when referring to what happens in the space currently occupied by RE in the PSC, will supplant the title of RE. According to the NCCA, a key feature of promoting school ethos is the teaching of the ‘Patron’s Programme’ during the school day, and patrons have developed their respective programmes to reflect and support the ethos of their schools ([NCCA 2015](#), p. 15). The Primary Curriculum Framework For Primary and Special Schools ([NCCA 2023](#)) states that some Patron’s Programmes are denominational or religious in nature, emphasising the place of children’s faith, spiritual, and moral development in their lives (p. 19). This is the case with Catholic RE.

### Catholic Religious Education in Primary Schools

As the focus of this article is Catholic RE and the Catholic school sector, attention will be paid to the Patron’s Programme in this context. The patrons of Catholic primary schools are the bishops of the relevant diocese in which schools are situated. The Irish Episcopal

Conference has designed an RE curriculum for its schools, entitled the Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland (IEC 2015). The CPPRECI is the first curriculum for Catholic primary religious education in Ireland. It encompasses both pre-school and primary school contexts. There are, however, very few pre-schools with a Catholic ethos in the Republic of Ireland and the curriculum states that Catholic pre-schools are found in the main in Northern Ireland. It is not assumed that children engaging at Level 1 of the curriculum (Junior–Senior Infants; Foundation Stage) will have received RE at pre-school level (IEC 2015, p. 20).

The aim of the CPPRECI is ‘to help children mature in relation to their spiritual, moral and religious lives, through their encounter with, exploration and celebration of the Catholic faith’ (IEC 2015, p. 31). It consists of four interrelated strands: Christian Faith, The Word of God, Liturgy/Prayer, and Christian Morality. These strands, each of which has its own individual aims, overlap and interact to form a holistic learning experience for the child (Hession 2015, p. 178). The four strands also contain broad outcomes or skills. The curriculum is innovative in that it empowers teachers to take account of the diverse levels of commitment to the Catholic tradition on the part of pupils. It is inclusive and is open to all children whose parents wish them to learn about, from, and into the Christian religious tradition (Hession 2015, p. 184).

Content in the CPPRECI is appropriate to the age and stage of development of the children. It is a spiral curriculum, which allows for deeper engagement with the content as the children progress. The CPPRECI at Level 1 (junior and senior infant classes) seeks to align itself with the national principles of early learning and development outlined in *Aistear* (IEC 2015, p. 20). Careful attention is paid in the CPPRECI to the ways in which each strand in the curriculum contributes to early learning goals outlined in *Aistear*, e.g., under the Strand of Christian Faith in Level 1, the expressed aim that children will ‘learn that life has a meaning and purpose’ coincides with Aim 4, Goal 5 of the Wellbeing Theme in *Aistear*, which states that children will ‘respect life, their own and others, and know that life has a meaning and purpose’ (p. 17).

The CPPRECI prompts teachers to utilise a range of approaches and creative processes such as play, story, visual arts, expressive arts, language, and ICT in delivering the content. This approach is complementary to the approaches envisioned by *Aistear*, albeit with differing epistemological underpinnings. The IEC commissioned the publication of a programme to support the implementation of the CPPRECI. This programme *Grow In Love* is a very valuable resource for teachers (Mahon and O’Connell 2015). Its pedagogical approach draws from the Shared Christian Praxis approach (Groome 1991), bringing the children on a journey from life to faith and back to life again in its various sections, *Let’s Look, Let’s Learn, Let’s Live*. It encourages partnership with the home through its At Home sections, and it is supported by online resources (IEC 2015–2019).

#### 4.2. Catholic Religious Education in Pre-School Settings

In the past, when attendance at pre-school was uncommon, children were socialised into a faith context in the home and in parish. There was no widespread involvement on the part of the Catholic Church in pre-school provision. Religious life was a part of family life. The emergence now of a vibrant pre-school education sector, emanating predominantly from the state, is occurring in a very different socio-cultural context. The near absence of Catholic pre-schools provides a tangible example of the declining influence of the Church in Ireland. Whereas the Catholic Church’s voice has been strong in engagements with education provision at primary level, the pre-school sector is an example of where ‘the institutional Church [in Ireland] has gone from the bedrock of Irish politics and society, to an almost entirely marginalised moral voice and source of local organisation around the country’ (Mc Graw and Tiernan 2022, p. 8).

The pre-school sector in Ireland is an educational space untethered to religion, and there should be no expectation that Catholic RE has a remit in this public space, unless provided by private providers offering pre-schools with a Catholic ethos. In such Catholic

pre-schools, the content of the Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland at its pre-school level is appropriate. As with Level 1, it too dovetails well with the Aistear curriculum, e.g., under the Strand of Christian Morality, the expressed aim that children will ‘develop self-esteem and respect for others and the natural environment’ aligns with Aim 1, Goal 5 of the Wellbeing Theme in Aistear which states that children will ‘respect themselves, others and the environment’ (p. 17).

Although it is beyond the remit of this present review, it is nonetheless important to highlight the lack of due consideration given to young children’s spirituality in much of the documentation regarding pre-school provision. For example, the latest national strategic policy on babies, young children, and their families, *First Five*, (DCEDIY 2019) mentions the spiritual development of children just once (and even that is merely a quotation from Article 27 of the UNCRC). Other aspects of children’s development, such as cognitive, physical, social, and emotional, are referred to in numerous instances in the policy document. This is significant since research has revealed that young children possess an innate spiritual capacity (Hay and Nye 2006) and spiritual development is a biological and psychological impulse from birth (Miller 2015). The expressed opinion of young Irish children is that they value opportunities to engage with matters of a spiritual nature (Harmon 2021; O’Farrell 2018). More optimistically though, a recent literature review conducted by French and Mc Kenna (2022) to provide assistance with the updating of Aistear gives more attention to the spiritual dimension of children’s development. Whilst being limited in the scope of literature that it draws from, it nonetheless offers greater insight and more attention to the sphere of spirituality in early childhood than previous documents and may prompt space for training in that realm at pre-service level. Without such preparation, there is a danger that the content may become devalued and increasingly marginalised and that the nurturance of young children’s spiritual and religious capacities may be compromised.

## 5. Training and Support of Educators Working in Early Years’ Settings

There are two cohorts of educators working in the field of early childhood education in the Republic of Ireland: (i) those working in infant classes in primary schools, known as Primary School Teachers (PSTs); and (ii) those working in pre-school settings, known as Early Years Educators (EYEs). Their respective preparation and training are outlined below.

### 5.1. Primary School Teachers

Preparation to teach Catholic RE in infant classes in the primary school context is offered to students on BEd and Professional Masters in Education degree courses in colleges of education throughout Ireland. In order to secure employment in Catholic primary schools, the Council for Catechetics of the Irish Episcopal Conference (IEC) stipulates that teachers are required to have completed a Certificate in Religious Studies/Education (CRS/E). There are differing guises of this elective qualification in the various institutions, but all offer theology modules and RE modules, which fulfil the requirements of the IEC in preparing students to teach RE in Catholic primary schools (ICBC 2018). The vast majority of student teachers in colleges of education in Ireland study the CRS/E in order to be qualified to teach in primary schools of a Catholic ethos, which constitute 89 percent of the schools in the country.

In Ireland, emphasis is placed on the pre-service provision of teachers, during which 120 h are dedicated to RE and theology. Continuing professional development and supports offered to qualified teachers in the area of Catholic RE are sparse and haphazard. A recent international publication on the formation of teachers in Catholic schools (Franchi and Rymarz 2022) raises the question of how well formation programmes cater for the diversity evident amongst those working in Catholic schools. It provides testimony from various jurisdictions in the west of the changed religious affiliations of teachers entering the profession and choosing to teach in Catholic schools. Writing from the Irish perspective in that publication, Sheridan (p. 62) highlights the multi-cultural and multi-religious society that characterises the religious landscape of Ireland today. He notes that this provides

challenges on a number of fronts, not least in the classroom, for teachers engaging with a diverse range of pupils. This concurs with [Kieran and Mullally \(2021\)](#), who call for greater input in initial teacher education programmes on designing and delivering inclusive RE (p. 434). The diversity among student teachers themselves also needs to be taken into greater consideration during their training. Although conducted in 2014, the research of [Heinz et al. \(2018\)](#) in assessing the level of diversity in initial teacher education (ITE) is important because of the scale of its reach, which included 50 percent of students in ITE at that time. Their findings indicate an overrepresentation of students identifying as Catholic compared to the general population. In spite of their stated religious identity, a significant proportion of ITE applicants rarely or never attend religious services and or practise their religion (p. 242). Respondents also signalled their compliance with the status quo of primary school teachers teaching RE rather than their outright support of it (*ibid.*, p. 241). Other more recent studies demonstrate how students are often ambiguous about the Catholic Church and the role it can play in society ([O'Connell et al. 2018](#)); they are unsure of their own belief perspectives and feel 'ambivalent, hesitant and insecure when teaching confessional RE to others' ([Kieran and Mullally 2021](#), p. 434).

It is clear that change is needed in (i) the model of preparation for pre-service teachers choosing to teach in Catholic primary schools in Ireland and (ii) a revitalisation of the supports available to them throughout their careers in terms of continuing professional development. The current emphasis on the Certificate in Religious Studies/Education as the principal means of preparation is insufficient. Its emphasis on the cognitive dimensions of learning (the head), to the neglect of the spiritual (the heart) and the pastoral (the hands), should be reconsidered. [Sheridan \(2022\)](#) suggests that finding opportunities for a more intentional formation for students will be the best and most sustainable way to ensure the place of Catholic education in the Republic of Ireland in future (p. 65). Placing the emphasis exclusively on the cognitive, with cohorts of student teachers, many of whom have not been religiously socialised and who lack theological literacy, deprives them of the opportunity to encounter and experience that which they may have missed, as the chain of memory that connects their generation to previous generations in matters of religious faith has become progressively weaker ([Franchi and Rymarz 2022](#), p. 171). A mystagogical-communicative or 'narthical' approach to religious learning ([Roebben 2009](#)) offers possibilities, and this is not as [Franchi and Rymarz \(2022\)](#) state, a call to a diminution of the specific religious character of Catholic teacher formation programmes, but rather to recognise the multiple starting points of prospective teachers' (p. 171).

### 5.2. Early Years' Educators

A minimum qualification for EYEs was introduced in 2016, and pre-service training is offered by further and higher education providers. If one conducts a web-based review of the modules taught in early childhood courses and degrees (gleaned from college and university websites), it is apparent that there is a paucity of modular content that prepares students to address either aspect of RE or education for spiritual development. Those seeking to teach in Catholic pre-schools will require some form of supplementary training in order to be adequately prepared to deliver Level 1 of the Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland.

## 6. Conclusions

This review has sought to address a gap in the literature with regard to the context of early years' Catholic RE. The principal locus for formalised early years' Catholic RE is infant classes in Catholic primary schools, as there are very few pre-schools with a Catholic ethos. The Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland provides primary school teachers and early years' educators with a progressive framework aligned to Aistear, which has been developed to respond to the shifting cultural and educational context of schools ([IEC 2015](#), p. 12). The *Grow In Love* programme offers teachers creative content and approaches to assist with implementation of the CPPRECI

and is supplemented by attractive resources and ICT materials. The formation of teachers to teach early years' Catholic RE will benefit from the inclusion of opportunities for student teachers to become immersed in more experiential practices of various kinds. There is no doubt that changes in pre-service provision will require additional skills and a change of mindset on the part of all.

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