Children's Agency in Multi-Belief Settings: The Case of Community National Schools in Ireland

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Abstract

Childhood studies place emphasis on children's agency, their ability to understand their own world and act upon it. Children actively participate in meaningful social interactions both in formal and informal settings. Considering recent large-scale migration in Ireland, it is vital to understand how children interact in an increasingly diverse world where they encounter cultural and religious difference. This article draws on a mixed-methods case study exploring religious education (RE) in community national schools (CNS), a new model of multi-denominational primary schools in Ireland. The results from focus groups with 10 to 12-year old children show the role of agency in developing religious knowledge and forming inter-ethnic friendships, and the crucial role schools play in empowering pupils to interact with an increasingly diverse society.

Key words: multi-denominational schools; Irish primary schools; religious education; child agency

Introduction

Europe has experienced significant social change in recent decades due to EU expansion and increased inter-country migration. This has resulted in population profile changes regarding cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious background. Cultural distance of some migrant groups may necessitate receiving countries to review their education system practices to ensure that the diverse (including religious and linguistic) needs of migrants are being met. Fair and inclusive education for migrants and minorities is key to enhancing equitable outcomes for all children (Author 3, 2016). An inclusive

approach in education specifies that children have opportunities for meaning-making in the social world they live in as well as opportunities for exercising their agency. Previous studies in Ireland have shown that the majority of migrant children settle in relatively quickly after a short transition period (Smyth et al., 2009). Exercising their agency, these children devise strategies in making sense of the new environment around them and take action, if necessary (Devine 2009). However, children's agency tends can also be bounded by contextual factors such as family and school, as well as structural factors (Bakewell, 2010). Agency operates within the confines of school teaching approaches including, for example, approaches to religious education along with school climate and ethos (Lynch and Lodge, 2002; Smyth et al., 2013).

Ireland differs from many Western European countries regarding its migration history. While many people emigrated from Ireland for most of the 20th century, the economic boom of the 1990s transformed Ireland to a country of net immigration by 1996 (Ruhs, 2005). Following global recession in 2008, emigration (particularly among Irish graduates) increased; however while some migrants left, many stayed. Since 2016, Ireland has returned to a country of net inward migration with large increases particularly among people from Romania, Brazil and Spain (CSO, 2017). Another differentiating feature is the heterogeneity of the immigrant population in Ireland in terms of religious, linguistic and national backgrounds.

Although Ireland continues to be mostly Catholic, religious diversity has increased. In the April 2016 census, Catholic religious affiliation fell to 78.3% compared to 84.2% in April 2011. Catholic denomination is also not confined to the Irish population; half of non-Irish citizens identified as Catholic in the census, especially migrants from Poland, Lithuania, the Philippines, Nigeria and Brazil. Those identifying themselves as having 'no religion' in April 2016 comprised 9.8% of the population, increasing by 73.6% from 2011. The 'no religion' group also has increased steadily since 2002, with the

highest concentrations around urban areas, comprising both Irish and migrant populations (CSO, 2017). In addition the largest-growing minority faiths are Orthodox and Apostolic/Pentecostal (CSO, 2012).

A considerable body of research focuses on immigrant children's experiences in Ireland (Devine, 2011; Author 3 et al., 2011; Kitching, 2011; Curry et al., 2011; Author 1 et al., 2015). Many of these studies point towards the external influences that shape migrant pupil's educational experiences including their lived experience, structural factors and education policy, while acknowledging the contributory family and child-related factors. Relatively few studies look at the ways children make sense of the belief backgrounds they are from in the context of diversity in the school environment. In Ireland, most publicly funded schools are Catholic; there are a small number of minority-faith schools and the remainder are either multi-denominational or inter-denominational in character (Author 1, 2016). The dominance of denominational schools in the context of increasing diversity has given rise to current debates about the place of religious education in schools and the need to address social integration (Rougier & Honohan, 2015). Within this context it is important to engage with the concept of child agency as perspectives on the extent to which children exercise their agency in developing their belief identity vary in international research (Smyth et al., 2013).

This article reports on findings from a wider study on religious education (RE) in community national schools (CNS), a new model of multi-denominational primary school in Ireland. This was the first empirical study on the CNS model. Using a mixed-methods approach, it explored the views of principals, teachers and pupils in 11 CNS[1]. This article reports on the focus groups conducted with pupils and explores children's agency in making sense of their own and their classmates' beliefs and the ways schools can empower or constrain this agency. According to official mission statements, CNS aim to provide 'equal and inclusive' education to children from all faiths and none. The extent to which

3

this bears out in practice is explored in this article and others (Author 1 et al., in press). Children's voices are particularly important; it is increasingly acknowledged that policy-making concerning children and youth should draw on their perspectives as they are a major driver of social change.

This article addresses the following questions: How do children negotiate the narratives around religion and belief they receive from school, home and other environments? How do they express their agency in relation to their own and other's beliefs? And what role do the CNS play in empowering pupils to interact with an increasingly diverse society? The next section considers the debates around children's agency, followed by existing research on how children exercise this agency in formal learning contexts. After this there is an overview of the Irish primary school sector, followed by a brief description of RE in CNS and the methods used. Key findings from the pupil focus groups are then presented and the final section concludes the article.

Contemporary conceptualisations of children's agency

Growing international research understands and promotes the notion of children being active participants and co-constructors of meaning (Smith & Leavy, 2008; Leonard, 2016). A crucial factor in contemporary thinking about children was the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which gave children the right to participate in decisions that affect them (Article 12), the right to freedom of expression (Article 13) and the right to thought, conscience and religion (Article 14). While this is a commendable development, the issue of children's agency is still debated. Child agency is a central concept in the 'new sociology of childhood' (James & Prout, 1997). It is accepted that a child has a sense of agency and possesses the ability to make choices and decisions, and have an impact on the world around them (Leonard, 2016) rather than be simply passive recipient of adult culture (Ansell 2005). Leonard (2016) argues that like adults, children are also social beings who

develop by actively interacting with adults and peers in the social structures in which they are located. Children's agency is constructed and reconstructed through interactions with adults, and children need to be considered as active actors who, by 'being' in the present, are 'agentically' producing, constructing, and reconstructing the world. However, as agency is a central component in childhood studies, Wyness (2015) has suggested its definition risks being considered a taken-for-granted feature of childhood. Debates surrounds the extent children possess agency, particularly in their ability to affect change (Valentine, 2011). Agency can also be influenced, and bounded, by background and institutional factors, including the hierarchical nature of the formal educational system and pupil-teacher power dynamics. In addition, newly arrived migrant groups face challenges as their cultural and social capital are often not recognised (Author 3, 2011). It is important to acknowledge that while schools, as secondary socialising agencies, play a central role in the distribution of life chances for individuals and groups (Heckmann, 1998) they are also sites of social change where different agencies operate (Lahelma, 2002). This article explores the extent to which pupils exercise their agency in CNS, how they are shaped by the social world around them and how they actively negotiate messages about religion they receive from the school and home environment (Hemming & Madge, 2012).

Children's agency in formal learning settings

With regard to religious beliefs, children are often overlooked as possessing agency, instead being seen as recipients of parents' beliefs (Cooey, 2010). Literature on young people and beliefs suggest they demonstrate agency in a variety of ways, such as attaching their own importance to beliefs, negotiating meaning and drawing on a variety of sources from their own background and external sources to reconfigure meaning (e.g. Hemming & Madge, 2012). They also draw on social networks such as family ties that have little theological affiliation (Day, 2009). In this regard in religious education (RE) the child should 'be seen as an agent of learning and an active constructor of knowledge' (Grajczonek & Hanifin, 2007, p. 159).

Schools can influence children's agency in relation to the expression or understanding of their beliefs as well as their knowledge of other beliefs. Teaching about world religions increases children's knowledge of other belief traditions (Smyth et al., 2013), and simply being present in a diverse school setting can serve to increase children's curiosity about religions and beliefs, and facilitate discussions among peers (Torstenson, 2006). On the other hand, attempting to accommodate separate RE classes in one school may highlight religious differences between children (Roebben & Dommel, 2013). In schools where the religious ethos differs from a child's home religion, children develop strategies for negotiating the two worlds, as found among Muslim students in Christian faith schools (Juchtmans & Nicaise, 2013; Wilson, 2015).

Children recognise social and cultural difference at a young age (e.g. Connolly et al., 2007) however the various ways they act on these differences, or develop friendships across social boundaries is varied and complex (Iqbal et al., 2016). In diverse school settings, migrant children can experience 'otherness' to the wider school community (Devine et al., 2004) and practice 'self-monitoring' to alleviate difference (Devine, 2009). Schools can also influence the 'otherness' of children through their approaches that either encourage inclusion (Author 1 2008a; Bryan and Bracken 2011) or highlight difference (Smith, 2005). Friendship groups can also form around similarity in background rather than across religious and ethnic boundaries. It is suggested that the migrant experience provides children with a common bond (Author 1, 2008b), and a confidence in 'encountering difference' that is missing from non-migrant children (Scholtz & Gilligan, 2017) that serves to form groups according to migrant status. Migrant children are particularly exposed to challenges to belonging that their peers do not have (Devine, 2009) and due to shared experiences, these friendships may be easier to maintain (Gilligan et al., 2010). Research in Ireland has shown that while conflict can exist between groups (Author 3 et al., 2014), there are positive interactions between children from different backgrounds,

although these may not be long-term friendships (Gilligan et al., 2010). Sharing a common interest and developing similarities however, has been shown to break down barriers between children of different religious or ethnic backgrounds (Devine & Kelly, 2006; Sedano, 2009).

Irish Primary School Sector

The majority of primary schools in Ireland are privately owned by religious denominations. The patron of a school is a representative of the owners and can be an individual or group. While schools are supported by the owners, the state contributes the majority of building and running costs. Patronage has traditionally been granted to religious groups, however since 1978 a charity body has been patron of multi-denominational Educate Together schools and in 2008 the Irish state, through Education and Training Boards (ETBs), established and became patron of the multi-denominational CNS model.

Unlike other European countries, the Irish primary school sector has a diversity of school types (Author 3 et al., 2012). This variation is unevenly distributed however; 96% of primary schools are denominational, with a religious ethos, the largest being Catholic (89.8%). The remaining schools are interdenominational (providing an inter-Christian ethos) and multi-denominational, accommodating children from all faiths and none. While multi-denominational schools have an inclusive and equal school ethos, many denominational schools also admit children from different faith backgrounds. Many Catholic schools have children from non-religious backgrounds (Smyth et al., 2013) and accommodate diversity in varying ways (e.g. Devine, 2013). Many pupils however attend schools that do not reflect their belief background (Author 1 et al., 2016).

While all Irish primary schools follow the 1999 primary school curriculum (which is currently being revised), the responsibility for RE lies with school patrons delivered through 'patrons' programmes'. Subsequently approaches to RE vary between schools. Denominational schools follow programmes

rooted in their specific religious ethos while the multi-denominational schools provide an ethics and world religions programme. Parents also have the right to 'opt-out' of RE on their child's behalf. However, due to the 'integrated curriculum', whereby ethos is incorporated into the everyday life of the school, those wishing to opt-out of RE lessons may be unable to 'opt-out' of the wider integration of a religious ethos in the school day (Yoffe, 2011). Furthermore, some schools lack alternative facilities for pupils who opt-out (Author 3 et al., 2014) resulting in minority- or no religion children remaining in classrooms but not participating, thus enabling 'othering' of these children.

Religious education in community national schools (CNS)

Community national schools (CNS) follow the multi-belief Goodness Me, Goodness You! (GMGY) programme of RE. Its distinctive characteristic is an aim of 'belief-nurturing' whereby children are encouraged to share their own experiences of their home beliefs with their classmates. The programme has evolved since the schools were established in 2008; the original junior programme for infants to second class (ages 4 to 9), included two elements: 'core' and 'belief-specific' teaching. The 'core' element accounted for the majority of the school year (approximately 80%) and was taught in class groups, inclusive of all children irrespective of beliefs. The remaining 20% of the year dedicated to 'belief-specific' teaching separated children into four belief groups, 'Catholic', 'Christian', 'Muslim' and 'other' for three to four weeks of the year. Teaching in these groups provided specific education in children's own faith backgrounds, however this practice has been abandoned in nine out of eleven schools as of April 2017 and the junior programme as a whole is currently under review. Teaching of the senior curriculum for third to sixth class (ages 9 to 12) started in September 2016. This curriculum includes four strands: Story, Thinking Time, What is a Community National School, Beliefs and Religions. The Beliefs and Religions strand does not include separating children into faith groups but instead includes 'family projects' where knowledge of specific belief traditions come from home rather than school.

While CNS do not aim to provide religious instruction, they offer sacramental preparation for communion in second class (age 7 to 9) and confirmation in sixth class (age 11 to 12) as part of the school day, similar to Irish Catholic primary schools. This is not a standardized practice however and differs in each school. The type and duration of preparation offered is negotiated between individual schools and parishes. Nonetheless, sacramental preparation in CNS has received criticism from Educate Together schools as being inequitable (Educate Together 2011). Other criticism has been received regarding the 'belief-specific' teaching element of the junior programme, likening it to 'religious segregation' and potential 'othering' of minority children and claims that these schools prioritise Catholic children (RTE news, 2015).

Methodology

This case study employed a mixed-methods approach. It included a survey of all eleven principals which explored the schools' approach to RE, diversity, and the school ethos. While the survey approach is useful for establishing general patterns, additional information that enables in-depth investigation of specific issues is also needed. To explore the complexity of practices at school level, in-depth interviews were conducted with principals and teachers. In six of the eleven schools, which had fifth class (age 10 to 12) or higher, 17 pupil focus groups were also conducted to gain the perspectives of children (see Table 1). This age group was selected as they would have likely participated in the 'belief-specific' element in junior classes, which has been largely suspended in most schools. Themes discussed with pupils centred on the school day, RE and friendships. This article is based primarily on these focus group interviews, although material from the adult interviews are also drawn upon in order to contextualise the findings.

[Table 1 about here]

The focus groups were arranged around 'belief-specific' groups; 'Catholic', 'Christian', 'Muslim' and 'other' (commonly referred to as Hindu-Buddhist-Humanist or HBH in the schools). It was expected that being in a homogeneous group the children may have been more forthcoming in expressing their views about beliefs. To tease out belief differences within the heterogeneous 'other' group we conducted focus groups with 'no religion' children and a Hindu group (schools did not have sufficient numbers of Buddhist children to make up a separate group). Focus groups were largely homogeneous in terms of belief background with the exception of the 'Christian' groups which consisted of children from a variety of Protestant denominations and Orthodox backgrounds. Focus groups consisted of four to five pupils each, with at least two groups in each school. Characteristics of these six schools are detailed in Table 2. Five out of the six schools were in urban locations with a considerable amount of diversity in the school population; one school (Abbeyview) was in a rural location and consisted of a more white, Catholic and Irish population than the other schools. The majority of groups were drawn from their class groups, so children would have been familiar to each other. Often the groups included close friendships, with evidence also of close friendships across different groups.

Full ethical clearance was sought from the university ethics committee. All 11 CNS were contacted with invitations to participate in the study with no school declining. Focus groups were arranged by the schools; the research team provided information on the study and how data would be used, with schools seeking full consent from parents for their children to take part. All interviews and focus groups were recorded and analysed in the first instance for themes relating to RE and managing diversity. Upon further analysis similar themes were noted across all schools. Initial analysis of the focus group data showed that agency played a role in children's interactions in the school and was then was guided by questions of children's agency detailed in the earlier sections. The names of all schools, adults and children were anonymised in this article using pseudonyms.

[Table 2 about here]

School approaches to religious education: learning about and from others

Previous research has shown that primary school pupils in Ireland generally enjoy RE classes as they enable them to 'have a break' from more academic subjects (Smyth et al., 2013). In this study, pupils across all schools and belief backgrounds enjoyed lessons where they learnt about other beliefs. Pupils expressed a preference for the whole-class learning together over the 'belief-specific' approach undertaken in their junior years. They enjoyed learning about other beliefs and what their friends would celebrate and believe. Some children expressed a preference for mixed classes as separate lessons often removed them from their friends in class. For many children, the mixed classes were also provided them with 'tools' for dealing with difference and an increasingly diverse world:

Orson (Christian): [Learning about other religions is] helpful for people, it gives them more knowledge and basically helps them with what life brings at them – to challenge anything that comes at them, it helps them, it's like life lessons.

Dialogue between pupils of different beliefs is encouraged in CNS and forms the 'belief-nurturing' approach of the programme. Teachers often facilitated discussions of religious events and festivals and pupils provided their own experiences on the topics. In this way, CNS can be seen as sites for intercultural dialogue and contact. Most children in the schools enjoyed this approach and learning new things from their classmates as shown in the extracts below from two groups:

Amelia (Catholic):   The person you're sitting beside could have a story about somewhere they've lived before, or their parents come from, which you probably wouldn't have heard before, that you probably wouldn't get from a textbook.

Nelinho (Christian):   I want the whole class together because we talk about other religions, we don't talk about our own religions, stuff we already know, we actually want to learn stuff that's new and talk about different religions and how they celebrate.

Nelinho's response above was common throughout the Christian groups. They were interested in learning about new things, however a minority of children in these groups preferred separate classes where they could learn about their own beliefs. As a whole, these groups were more active in expressing their religious backgrounds. Many stated they enjoyed reading the bible with their families at home and attending church regularly. As self-reported enjoyable activities, this may account for the small minority of Christian children preferring the separate classes, simply because they enjoy the lessons and activities. The majority of children in the Christian groups were also from African migrant backgrounds which may account for their more active religious engagement given the importance of religious communities as sites of socialising for African families in Ireland (Coakley & Mac Einri, 2007). Nevertheless, like the majority of children, many of the Christian group ultimately preferred mixed classes to belief-specific ones. Muslim children in particular expressed boredom with separate classes because lessons covered what they already knew. Many of these children attended extra classes outside school where they learnt Arabic and studied their religion. Catholic children saw separate classes as relating to sacramental preparation and did not necessarily view them as 'religion' classes. There was little belief-specific content in the HBH groups and so Hindu and 'no religion' children found

these classes similar to regular classes. Principals and teachers also noted the lack of value separate classes had for HBH children.

Developing belief identity: The influence of school, home and religious leaders

Young people's identities are negotiated and renegotiated by both primary (family) and secondary (school) socialisation (Author 1, 2010; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). The RE approach in CNS positions parents as agents of primary socialisation of their children's beliefs, and the approach taken in the senior curriculum re-affirms this. Family can provide young people with information on their ethnic heritage, expressed by rituals, beliefs, values and traditions (Modood, 2005) and religion can help strengthen family ties (Lees & Horwath, 2009). In addition to the home, children can be socialised by activities in church, mosque or other sites of belief practice. In this study, the influence of these different spheres of religious socialisation (home and church for example) differed across schools and within groups. Many Muslim children attended weekend or after-school classes and a considerable number of children in the Christian groups regularly attended church with their family and took part in church-organised activities. Hindu children also attended events relating to their religion. When discussing belonging to the Catholic faith, some children in the Catholic groups stated they attended Mass with family, however receiving the sacraments was seen as a large part of the reason for their belonging to the Catholic group within school. Schools are traditionally the sites of Catholic faith formation in Ireland, preparing Catholic children for the sacraments of communion and confirmation.

Oisin (below) had previously expressed a strong belonging to the Catholic faith. Focus groups took place during Lent and so this as an example of practice came up in the discussion. Oisin and Amelia state they learnt about Lent from school (both the CNS and another Catholic school) and they are both 'doing Lent', understood as giving up something they enjoy:

Oisin (Catholic):	I'm trying to stay off it [fizzy drinks] for 40 days and 40 nights and I'm hoping to get the 40 days and if I'm cheating I have to take two extra days off for something.
Interviewer:	How did you find out about that?
Oisin:	I actually went to Church one day but school actually taught that when I was doing my communion, they were going over all those things, they were going over bible stories and things like that and that was one of them and they went over that in GMGY for communion.
Amelia (Catholic):	I am doing lent as well, I think I learnt about it in my old school I think it was in one of our school books or something.

Compared with the discussions with minority-faith children, many Catholic children learnt about Catholic religious practice and knowledge from school. Oisin stated he would go to church occasionally, but for many of the Catholic groups, Mass attendance was infrequent or rare. They also equated learning about Catholicism with preparing for the sacraments. The provision of sacramental preparation during the school day in most of the CNS was brought up by teachers and principals as one reason why their Irish Catholic parents chose the CNS model rather than the local multi-denominational school Educate Together who facilitate preparation after school hours. Teachers shared conversations they had with parents who did not wish for religious instruction, but nevertheless desired for their children to undertake the sacraments. Parents may want their child to accumulate cultural and religious capital by exposing them to discussing other faiths and none in the new CNS. As regular church attendance is also in decline (Breen, 2009) the desire for sacramental preparation for Irish parents may be more a cultural tradition than an indication of religious observance.

The provision of sacramental preparation however was noted by some teachers to be at odds with the school's inclusive ethos as well as by pupils (both Catholic and minority-faith) who perceived priority given to Catholic children (see Author 1 et al. forthcoming). Since this study was conducted, and preliminary results presented to the CNS patrons, the Education and Training Boards (ETB), the model has started to move towards facilitating sacramental preparation outside of school hours (O'Brien, 2017).

Home and outside sites of religious instruction were an important source of knowledge for minority-belief children. Minority Christian children (mostly from the Evangelical Protestant traditions) mentioned praying with family, or attending church where they could meet their friends. These groups demonstrated that they recognised differences between Christian traditions (they 'worship in different ways'), but understood an overarching similarity between them. The below extract is from a Christian group, where Ellijah (Pentecostal Christian) and Matthew (Indian Orthodox) were discussing differences between the Christian denominations. While Matthew's explanation may be a little muddled considering the important role of confession in the Pentecostal faith, it nevertheless highlights that children in the Christian groups recognised differences between various Christian denominations. In the same discussion, Faith, also Pentecostal, highlights the differences between Protestant and Catholic traditions:

Ellijah: Some people worship in different ways, Christians can worship in different ways.

Matthew: When he [Ellijah] goes to church he might not confess, until after he's 12, he might not confess, and I might and he might take his communion, and I might not. We believe the same thing, but in different ways.

Faith: Catholics confess their sins to the priest but in my… some Christians, confess it to God.

One way children express their agency is through discussing their own and their classmates' beliefs. In the above extract it is of little concern that Matthew potentially makes an error, the analytical interest is in the recognition and acceptance that not all children come from the same background and this is presented unproblematically.

The majority of children in the study expressed belonging to the same faith as their parents, however they negotiated this belonging and understood it in their own ways, in line with Smyth et al. (2013). One girl gave us insight into her (minority) church in the Philippines (Members of Church of God International, although she used the children's television show name of KNC). She takes on some of the practices of this faith (not cutting her hair), although she does not express an overt sense of belief:

Jolene (Christian):   We're learning about the verses and we cannot change who we are, we have to be grateful for what we've already got. That's why I don't cut my hair; most of the people in the Philippines, they like to cut hair and wear makeup and they go to pubs and drink wine.

For others, parents had different beliefs or were from different faith backgrounds. Children negotiated these differences to make decisions about their own preferences and what they may or may not believe:

Molly (No Religion):   I just say I'm no faith because my Dad and me like watching educational stuff and reading lots of books so my Dad would like to

16

	talk to me about this stuff so he'd tell me some facts about why he doesn't [believe] and my Mum [Catholic] would tell me stuff about why she believes in Jesus. So I just decide which one I think is most likely to be true.
Interviewer:	So she wasn't very convincing then?
Molly:	Well she was, but I was like well the facts seem more.... realistic, so I kind of, just went with my Dad.

In contrast, some children clearly expressed that their decisions about religion were down to their parents. Although Veronica, who was from an African migrant background, was in the Christian group, she described herself as both Christian and Catholic. She attended communion classes with the Catholic children at behest of her mother however she feels more Christian than Catholic. Coming from a migrant background Veronica's parents perhaps encouraged her to do her communion as it may be seen to be part of Irish culture and assist in integration.

In line with Smyth et al. (2013), these findings show that children in CNS negotiate the belief backgrounds they are from and evaluate belonging. They also practice agency in developing a sense of their own identity, even if this is sometimes constrained by parental expectations. Religious practice, such as making their communion or attending Church, may not necessarily carry significance, and it is difficult to extrapolate from this data the levels of children's personal religious beliefs or spirituality. Nevertheless, they tended to make decisions about their beliefs, drawing upon what they learnt at school, home or other sites of religious practice and learning. The influence of these sites differed however for children from Catholic and minority-faith backgrounds. Pupils discussed beliefs in a way that showed basic understanding of religious difference and took an interest in their own and their friend's beliefs and backgrounds.

As stated earlier on, schools can be an important site for intercultural dialogue and contact. School curriculums produce symbolic representations of education and define and legitimise the social practices of school (Ross, 2007). Through representation of some groups of pupils or individuals in a certain way, schools can construct 'otherness' based on 'deviance from the norm'. This can result in approaches that serve to invalidate migrant or minority-faith children's experiences (Bryan & Bracken, 2011). The GMGY curriculum in the CNS attempts to overcome this issue by facilitating pupil's inter-belief learning and understanding. Another strand of the senior curriculum, Thinking Time, focuses on developing critical thinking and debating skills. This encourages children to understand other's beliefs better. Pupils valued this strand it for its ability to help them articulate their opinions and providing the space for voicing ideas. This is facilitated by the structure established by the design of the curriculum, with teachers enabling children to engage with their agency in this way:

Alfie (Christian):	It's like a time when you can think of your own thing and nobody, you can't just go to someone and say their opinion is wrong, because it's like your own opinion and you think, they might not think it. It's like you don't necessarily argue about it but you come together as a group and you make your answers out of both of them, you don't argue about it.

All CNS attempt to follow the inclusive and equal ethos of the model. This is largely achieved through an admissions policy that does not discriminate on religious grounds. Approaches to RE and intercultural practices are another way that CNS attempt to achieve an inclusive environment, although there were slight differences between schools. Differences were noted between urban, more culturally diverse schools and less diverse rural schools. Due to the homogeneity of religion and cultures, children at these schools may have fewer opportunities to 'learn from others' than in the

more heterogeneous city schools and rely more the knowledge of the teacher. This is not solely an issue with rural schools however. Many rural schools in Ireland may be culturally diverse due being the only school in the area. This observation relates to the CNS model specifically. The design of the curriculum to encourage learning from others is important however in the absence of children from certain backgrounds, the teacher becomes the main imparter of knowledge. In the case of Abbeyview, a rural school with a largely white, Catholic and Irish population with a large Eastern European (Catholic) intake, the teacher had delayed the teaching of the Religions and Beliefs strand of the curriculum. He had stated a lack of confidence in teaching this part of the curriculum largely because of the limited knowledge he could draw on from families from diverse backgrounds. To promote the equal and inclusive nature of the CNS model across all schools, there is perhaps a need for more curriculum support in schools with less diversity to equip students with the (intercultural and inter-religious) skills needed in increasingly diverse societies.

Interactions across religious and ethnic groups

Peers are also important in secondary socialisation and social integration. The majority of pupils stated they enjoyed school because they would see their friends. The term 'friend' was used by the children to mean those they had a close relationship with (such as 'best friends'), but also extended to mean classmates they had friendly feelings towards but perhaps did not play with as much. Groups of friends were sometimes in the same focus group (as part of the same religious group), but often children referred to their close friends as being from different religious groups. This was the case for both migrant and Irish children. The majority of pupils reported friendly interactions across religious and ethnic boundaries. In one Catholic group, Aoife (Irish) stated her friends were from Pakistan and Nigeria and she was mentioned when these children spoke of their friendships.

Rather than teachers, peers, especially individual friends, have been found to be more important in settling in and developing a feeling of belonging in school (Arnot et al., 2014). In this study children formed friendships for a variety of reasons such as sharing a language or religion, as well as common interests or experience. Shrisa (Hindu) described it as 'something in common that clicked'. Children noted their friends' religious or ethnic differences, demonstrating recognition of difference. Similar interests were also noted in interviews, as a potential way of establishing common connections with others, such as sport, music or TV shows.

Children from both migrant and non-migrant backgrounds valued what they could learn from others. Importantly, migrant children also valued their friends from the same background for teaching them about their own language and culture. Cathy (Catholic) and Jolene (Christian), both from the Philippines, were in different groups for the interviews. Cathy stated she valued what Jolene could teach her about their home language. Alliyah (Muslim) from Pakistan was also close friends with Cathy and Jolene and stated when she started at the school she 'didn't have any English and they helped her out'. While these are children shared a migrant background, their friendship cut across religious boundaries. Irish children also expressed they enjoyed learning new things such as traditions from their migrant classmates. There were many incidences in the interviews of friendships developing across ethnic lines also, and importantly across migrant and non-migrant lines (migrant children and white, Irish and Catholic children). Previous research indicates that while friendly interactions exist, close friendships tend to form in groups of migrant children or non-migrant children (Gilligan et al., 2010). Children emphasised that being friendly was a prerequisite for their friendships but whether these school friendships develop into long-term friendships into secondary school remain to be seen. The findings show however that religious or ethnic background form little barrier to developing friendly interactions at the primary level in the CNS.

Pupils also reported school efforts to encourage mixing. These included classroom seating plans so children did not always sit next to the same people, the use of 'buddy benches' so children would know if someone had no one to play with at break times and encouraging pupils to greet new children. Children noted cultural, religious and linguistic differences among their peers, however these were mostly mentioned positively. Many children saw their schools as safe places without bullying. However, some children shared stories about themselves or others being picked on by others in school or outside with regards to their culture or religion, as this exchange between two Muslim girls shows

Aliyah:	In my class people ask me why do you wear hijab and they're asking questions about it sometimes I get angry and they always ask me, and I'm like it's my religion.
Alina:	Sometimes they don't take it that way they ask you and you can tell that they're being sarcastic and they just want to annoy you, but sometimes you can tell that they really want to know, but sometimes they just want to make fun of you even though we don't make fun of them.

Discussion

In Ireland, the debate around the role of religion in schools is taking place in the context of increasing diversity and secularisation (Rougier & Honohan 2015). While there is a growing body of research on children's experiences of diversity in Ireland, often within a highly denominational education system, this was the first study conducted on a new model of multi-denominational primary school. This article contributes to our understanding of children's perspectives on RE and interethnic friendships within

the context of growing secularisation and diversity in Irish society. The study did not set out to explore children's religious beliefs, so it is therefore not possible to conclude from the pupil focus groups whether or not children are developing a spirituality or the depths of their belief. The findings presented here however suggests the ways children negotiate the narratives they learn from home, school or religious teachers and the way they make sense of the information they learn within a religiously and ethnically mixed school environment.

Through pupil focus groups, it was found that children express their agency in a variety of ways. Pupils attending CNS expressed a keen desire to learn about different religions, beliefs, cultures and traditions. They also expressed a preference for the mixed GMGY classes over the belief-specific ones. In addition, children made sense of knowledge they gained through home, school and religious settings. They engaged in practices that were learnt about in different settings and showed an understanding of difference between belief traditions. In many interviews children showed how they interacted with narratives. The literature on children's agency recognises that children are active participants in their social worlds and co-constructors of meaning (Leonard, 2016). Agency is a concept that can apply to many aspects of a child's school experience. This article concerns itself with children's agency in negotiating the narratives they receive from school, home and other spheres of influence in negotiating cultural difference within the school. In relation to religion and beliefs, Hemming & Madge (2012) suggest young people and children express agency through understanding beliefs in their own way. In the findings section regarding developing belief identity, the findings show that children drew on home or family practices such as reading the bible, undertaking their communion or attending extra out of school classes and events, as ways to express their belonging to a wider belief group. Drawing on family connections and creating a sense of belonging with a religious group may have little theological significance (Day, 2009) and the data is limited in how it approaches spiritualty or children's deep religious connections. However, children actively constructed knowledge from the

information they received from family, school (particularly in RE) and the multi-cultural school environment they were part of, especially from friends about their own experiences and family traditions. Agency is also conceptualised as the ability to act upon wider structural processes, something that children, because of their generational position in society, are often unable to achieve (Valentine, 2011). Nevertheless, while children may not affect the day to day running of their school, or the wider structural processes that influence relations between children and adults and different ethnic and religious groups, children's agency in relation to the meaning of religion and the ways they interact with knowledge and experience of diversity should not be overlooked.

Pupils in our research also exercised their agency in relation to their interactions with peers. While they recognised ethnic and religious differences between their classmates, multi-ethnic friendships were widely reported throughout all schools and belief groups, with shared interests forming the basis of many friendships. Previous research has shown that in multi-ethnic schools, children may form friendship groups around cultural similarity (Smith, 2005). While many of these studies report positive feelings towards diversity, they highlight 'separateness' (Scholtz & Gilligan, 2017) between migrant and non-migrant children. The present study found both migrant and non-migrant children reported cross-cultural friendships. This finding can be accounted for by considering the CNS ethos as a vehicle for facilitating intercultural discussion and supporting children's skills and confidence to 'encounter difference' and empower their agency in developing their own identity by learning from others. We did not detect problems or tensions between groups in interviews; pupil's perspectives about diversity was were mostly positive but some children had some negative experiences. To explore the extent to which conflict between groups plays a role in children's interactions in CNS would require a more in-depth study with observations to complement the self-reported behaviour of pupils in focus groups.

When discussing agency, it is important to not overlook the potentially constraining nature of structure. Above, we suggest children do not hold the agentic potential to exert much influence on the day to day running of schools in the CNS model. The findings from this study suggest however that CNS play a role in empowering children in exercising their agency to make sense of difference and engage in meaning-making. Learning about other religions, and children learning from each other was facilitated by the teacher with the support of a school ethos that accommodates for this religious and cultural diversity.

Smyth et al. (2013) suggest that school ethos can constrain pupil's individual agency. In this study, we found that the approach to RE enabled children to take an active role in shaping their religious identity through providing a safe space for children to engage in learning about religion and learning from their peers. Rather than finding differences between religious groups, the authors found differences between urban and rural (often less diverse) locations. Here we found children would have less knowledge of other beliefs. While one school had delayed teaching of the beliefs and religions of the senior curriculum which can explain this finding, there may also be fewer opportunities in schools with a majority white, Irish Catholic population for learning from those with differing beliefs which is a key part of the CNS model. The RE lessons provide information about religions and beliefs, however a large part of its approach is engaging with beliefs of others within the classroom environment. Due to this, in those schools with lower levels of diversity, non-migrant Catholic children may be at a disadvantage when learning about diversity in wider society.

It should be acknowledged that although the majority of primary schools in Ireland are denominational many of these schools have adopted intercultural approaches to support increasingly diverse populations (e.g. Devine, 2013). However, these may be confined by the overarching religious ethos of the school. The lack of an overt religious ethos in CNS does not in theory prioritise one religion

over another; however, in practice the issue of sacramental preparation has led to a perceived privileging of the Catholic group as noted by teachers and students (see Author 1 et al, forthcoming). Arguably, a cultural change is required in Ireland to renegotiate the role of and interaction between parents, parish priests and schools in providing sacramental preparation, ideally with schools playing considerably less or even no role in sacramental preparation. The ETB decision to move sacramental preparation outside school hours is recognition of this need.

The discussion on the specific ways children's agency is empowered or constrained throughout the Irish primary school sector is limited by this article's focus the CNS model only. The wider study explored approaches to RE within the CNS and this article draws upon the focus groups conducted as part of this study on the ways children's agency is expressed and the role schools play in constraining or empowering this expression. To assess wider structural processes a comparative study throughout the sector would be required, acknowledging that there may also be significant differences within school types as well differences between rural and urban environments as noted above. The findings reported in this article show that the CNS approach enables children's agency in relation to their expression of beliefs and their intercultural dialogue with other pupils. It is important to note that the CNS model is an evolving model. Over recent years it has moved away from separating children into 'belief-specific' groups and recently attempts have been made to standardise the approach to sacramental preparation. The senior RE curriculum was only introduced in September 2016 and the effect this will have on pupil's knowledge and agency is yet to be seen. The junior cycle is also under review. The wider study therefore provides a snapshot of an emerging model. As it stands, this article highlights the important role that school structures such as intercultural practices, ethos, curriculum and RE play in realising an inclusive and equal vision and the importance of placing the child at the centre of approaches to integration and recognising their agency with regards to knowledge of theirs and their peer's beliefs.

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Note

1. At the time of research, there were 11 CNS in Ireland. One more has since been established (September 2017) which was not part of this study.

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Table 1: Dataset

Principal Survey	**11**	**Interviews**	
		Principal interviews	11
		Teacher Interviews	21
		Student focus groups	
		Catholic	6
		Christian	5
		Muslim	3
		No Religion	2
		Hindu	1
		Total interviews/focus groups	**49**

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Table 2: School characteristics of six schools with focus groups (taken from principal survey)

School	Location	No. of pupils	Largest belief group	Second largest belief group	Ethnic composition
Greenway	City/urban	673	Catholic	Other Christian	Majority Irish with large global diversity
North Street	Large town/urban	255	Catholic	No Religion	Majority Irish with large global diversity
Abbeyview	Small town/rural	77	Other Christian	Catholic	Majority Irish and Eastern European. Minority African population
Castletown	City/urban	783	Other Christian	Catholic/Muslim	Majority non-Irish with largest ethnic groups from Eastern Europe and Africa.
Clement Road	Large town/urban	497	Catholic	Other Christian	Majority Irish with large global diversity
Ashdale	Large town/urban	187	Catholic	No Religion	Majority Irish with large global diversity