The Experiences of Minority Faith and Non- Religious students in Irish Catholic Post Primary Schools

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Globalization, immigration and socio-political shifts have increased the diversity of Irish society, creating new challenges for a traditionally homogenous Catholic school system. The census reports (2006), (2011) show a population with the percentage identifying as Catholics decreasing and those identifying as, orthodox, Apostolic, Pentecostal, Muslim or of no religion increasing. Currently, some students attend a school with a belief system different to their parents or their own. The rationale for this research was based on the premise that it was unclear how Catholic Post-Primary schools include non-Catholic students. Twenty-one students of minority faith or non - religious world view were interviewed regarding their Post-Primary school experiences of religious ethos. Analysis suggests students 'sense of belonging and well-being may be affected by negative stereotyping, Catholic centric practices and coercion to acquiesce to Catholic norms. The development of cultural humility 'practises' is recommended as an avenue to address the needs of an increasingly diverse school population.

Background

Currently, 70% of Ireland's state funded second level schools are managed solely by religious trustees or by religious trustees in partnership with the State (Catholic Schools Partnership 2014). The remaining 30% are in the main managed by Education Training Boards (ETBI) and it is argued that they also have a traditionally Catholic ethos in order to cater for a majority Catholic school population. There are nine Educate Together Post-Primary schools which are non-denominational. The current school patronage

system, is problematic for some non-Catholic students, as it is impossible for the State to provide a school which caters for the beliefs of all students and parents in every community (Hickey, 2012). Moreover, segregation on religious grounds challenges ideals of social cohesion.

Research Methodology

As the focus of this research was to understand the experiences of non – Catholic students in Catholic schools, it was decided that a qualitative method of research would be used. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to help the researcher to understand at a deeper level the experiences of these students (Stockes,2006 ; MacLeod, 2014, Cohen, Mannion, Morrison 2007). A convenience purposive sample of research participants was sourced by contacting, Post Primary schools, minority Faith and non-religious groups and integration centers. Eleven minority faith students and ten non- religious students were interviewed between November 2014 and March 2015. All students were between 14-18years and self-identified their religious status.

Research Findings and Analysis

It is not within the scope of this article to describe all themes which emerged from analysis of the interview transcripts. However key themes of 'Otherness', and 'Challenges' are explored.

Theme 'Otherness'

'Otherness' can be understood as being different in some way (Volf, 2010). Bauman argues that identities are set up as dichotomies, 'othering' give identities meaning and the belong to group power to suppress the other (cited in Zevallos 2011). Research by Bryan (2008), (2012), argues Irish Education guidelines on intercultural education, support the habitus of the dominant group while leaving minorities vulnerable to power imbalances.

At interview students articulated how their religious difference was negatively stereotyped, they also described the effects of 'othering' on their sense of belonging and in some cases on their well-being. Stereotyping may be understood as generalising and labelling particular groups of people with often negative traits or characteristics (Devlin, 2006). Non- religious students were acutely aware of the negativity surrounding their worldview, which they articulated as follows:

> *"No morals. Atheists have no morals". (S11)*

> *"my class tutor, told my class not to hang around with people who weren't Catholic because they were a bad influence, I was in the classroom, when this was said". (S12)*

> *"Like since I have no religion, people assume I'm against all religions that I Like hate them but that is not true, like I said before I respect people more, I wish I could believe in a religion, I just can't". (S9)*

Most non-religious students pointed out that they were not anti-religious and felt strongly that Catholicism should be respected, some expressed regret that they could no longer believe. One student articulated his need to hide his atheist beliefs in order to protect those he loved:

> *"It would break my Granny's heart completely, if she heard I was an atheist, she would not be able to cope with hearing something like that. I wouldn't want her to hear something like that". (S1)*

Harper, (2007), reports, non-religious people "as a potentially maligned social category to belong to"(p.551). Moreover, Downey (2004 p.42), found that nonreligious people who live within predominantly religious societies are vulnerable to discrimination. In an Irish context Voluntary Secondary schools may legally give preference to co-religionist students and teachers in order to maintain their religious ethos. (section 37 of the Employment Equality Acts (1998-2015) and section 7.3(c) of the Equal Status Act (2000-2015).

Students holding minority religious beliefs also articulated the negative stereotypes associated with their beliefs:

> *"Yeah when they put that 9 /11 on TV in school, they were talking so bad about Muslims" (S11).*

> *"I stopped wearing the hijab coming to the school which just makes me feel so horrible, like this is my religion, I should be wearing the hijab, but I can't. I know everyone is going to be looking at me, why are you wearing that thing on your head, it's just you know". (S6)*

The above findings on Muslim students' experiences are in agreement with research by Carr (2016), who found "Muslim students felt excluded and indeed abused through discriminatory practices visited upon them by teachers, and classmates" (p.30). The

impact of 'othering' on a students' sense of belonging and well- being was clearly articulated as follows :

> "You just feel so horrible, so disheartened, you think of all the other
> people who are coming to the school with the same religion same culture,
> it's not the same fate for them".(S11)

> "I was really scared. At times I felt really bad. I thought if everyone else
> is Catholic, I should be Catholic too, these thoughts I'm having about it
> not being real, are idiotic and I shouldn't believe it. I felt really horrible
> for quite a long time". (S7)

Adolescents have an intense need to feel they belong (Levine, 2000), research has found this need may cause some low status group members to internalise or adopt a negative stereotype thus damaging their self-esteem and putting them at risk of becoming radicalised. (Branscombe et al, 1999; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002; Latrofa, 2012;).

Theme – Student Challenges

At interview the key challenges identified by students included Catholic centric practices and coercion to acquiesce. Catholic centric practices identified by students of particular concern included faith formation, graduation ceremonies, school retreats and admissions policies. In particular graduation ceremonies which centered on a Catholic service caused distress and exclusion as explained by the following student:

> "my parents want to come to school and celebrate my graduation,
> they can't, cause it's all Catholic and in a Church, my mum just
> feels so horrible". (S6)

Students were very clear at interview on the need to acquiesce with Catholic school practices. Students articulated how their religious freedom was controlled and Catholic values imposed in their schools:

> "I am expected to go to the masses, I go along,"(S17)

> "It's obligatory to stand for the prayer "(S2)

> "I wasn't allowed to opt out of religion, I knew I just had to suck it up,
> and there was nothing I could do. I was in a Catholic school". (S13)

"I am the only Hindu student in the school, My parents told me to blend in. That is what I do. I blend in. I learned the Catholic prayers, so I could join in. (S16)

Parents and students of 18years have a legal entitlement to opt their children or themselves out of religious services and classes as stated in Article 44.2.4 and Article 42.1 of the Irish Constitution. Furthermore section 30 (2)-(e) of the Education Act 1998 also underpins this legal right. Research on the "Opt Out" provision found it exasperates feelings of difference and isolation (MaWhinney, 2012, Faas, Darmody, Sokolowska, 2016). Furthermore, it came to light during interview that some Catholic parents may not be supportive of their children's non-religious beliefs.

Recommendation

The practice of Cultural Humility as described by Fisher-Borne, Montana Cain, Martin (2015) is recommended as a possible avenue to balance the constitutional right of the Catholic majority to choose a Catholic religious education (Article 41, Irish Constitution) with the rights of non- Catholic minorities to attend their local school and feel they equally belong. Cultural humility, may be understood as the "ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented (or open to the other) in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the [person]" (Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington and Utsey,2013, p.2). Cultural humility is not about diluting anyone's religion but rather making space for everyone's beliefs. Cultural humility is increasingly becoming part of initial education programmes for health care and social service providers. The intrinsic links between Irish culture and religion or 'Cultural Catholicism'(Inglis,2007; Demerath, 2000), makes it particularly appropriate in an Irish context. Key elements of cultural humility include an individual focus rather than a cultural focus, thus endeavoring to respect the beliefs, uniqueness, individuality and human dignity of every person while ensuring religious stereotyping is avoided. Secondly, the notion of cultural competency is considered illusive and unattainable. It would challenge any teacher to name all religions, understanding the tenets, personal interpretations and traditions is nigh on impossible. Competency is replaced by good communication, taking time to listen to individuals and agree workable strategies in order to support the best possible educational provision for each student. Furthermore, cultural humility demands individuals critique existing practice and challenge social

inequalities. It challenges inherent power imbalances, asking teachers to recognize that "among a dominant culture's deeply ingrained values are those that perpetuate separation and discrimination" (Dunn, 2002, p. 107). This is particularly important in Irish schools where Catholicism is predominant and is only recently problematized by an increasingly diverse student population.

In summation, the findings suggest non-Catholic students' sense of belonging and well-being is challenged by some school practices. The practices of Cultural humility could address the inherent power imbalances, enabling schools to cherish all students equally.

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