Children 'coming out religiously': Power and the acceptable limits of choice in Ireland's education system

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Abstract
This empirical paper examines, from a critical sociological perspective, the dimensions of power through which children come to identify religiously in and through schools in the Republic of Ireland. The data presented is taken from a major qualitative study titled *Making Communion: Disappearing and Emerging Forms of Childhood in Ireland*. The Irish Research Council funded this project.

The specific focus of this paper is the power-laden constitution of subjects of religious 'choice'. The paper examines the subtle ways in which various groups and individuals: children, working class and racialised minorities, are subject to preconditions about 'choice' of religious identity.

It is argued that the discourse of coming to 'choose' religion reifies religion and religious identities as foundational, static truths with universal, rather than particular or negotiable tenets. We find that while it is frequently legitimate for adults to regard children as not capable of religious choice or 'real' religious identification, the classed codes and racialisations through which authentic religiosity is produced is far more subtle, yet no less exclusionary in school contexts. Two conclusions are drawn. First, the universalizing concept of 'choice' by itself produces hidden inequalities and cannot alone regulate school access in a fair manner. Second, I argue that curricula must offer the opportunity to explore the power dynamics through which religious identifications are essentialised and delimited in generationed, classed and racialised ways.

The Irish education context

In recent decades, formal affiliation to the Catholic Church across the island of Ireland has declined, and questions of what constitutes belonging to 'Irish' society have altered course, due in no small part to globalisation processes (Inglis 2007; O'Connor 2008). Ireland is not unique in having to negotiate such changes. However, the *de facto* operations of its school system makes Ireland unique in terms of what it means to grow up in state-funded education, and to 'come out religiously'. Ireland's elementary schools are not state-controlled: the state supports various patron bodies in the establishment of their own schools. While appearing to be inclusive and adaptable, historically, this 'deregulated' education provision has been most advantageous to the Catholic Church (Akenson 1970; Inglis 1987). Despite declines in Catholic religious observance, 91% of elementary/primary schools funded by the state remain under Catholic patronage. They retain the legal right to hire and fire certain teachers and enroll certain children over others, in accordance with their stated ethos.

While reticent about change, the politics of Catholic Church and wider state educational reform have led certain bishops to agree that *some* Catholic schools be divested to the state, so that alternative patrons, such as the popular Educate Together multidenominational school movement, might take their place. The 2009-2012 report of the advisory committee to the state *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism* has made a number of recommendations, which focus particularly on allowing parents in certain areas to express what choice of patron they would prefer for their local school (Coolahan et al. 2012). This circulation and embedding of the discourse of 'school choice' and 'religious preference', and what it means for children, is a key focus of the current study. In short, the argument is that 'choice' becomes a marketised, bureaucratic governing technology beyond issues of religious identity *per se*, that delimits the field of what can be recognised and validated as religion and religious identity.

Conceptualising 'coming out religiously'

The period since 2007 has seen a resurgence in communications media debate over the place of the religious in Irish primary education (Irish Independent 2007; O'Toole 2009; Sheridan 2012). 48 hours after his appointment as Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairí Quinn TD announced that he would be 'pressing on with' the establishment of a Forum on School Patronage

> As an immediate priority. The focus of the forum will be on identifying the methods and processes by which schools can be transferred from Catholic patronage in order to create greater diversity and choice (Quinn 2011).

Twinning modernist and mercantile themes, and subsuming the former under the latter, public debate has developed a legacy of privileging the metaphor of 'free school choice' as a minimalist guarantee of equality of access for parents since the 1960s (O'Sullivan 2005). The modernist nation-state management of 'religious and belief systems' is the hallmark of the subsequent Forum Advisory Group's report (Coolahan et al. 2012). The

'balancing of rights' is described as a matter of the orderly functioning of democracy in the report, with frequent deployment of a universal interpretation of international human rights discourse. The report recommends that the state divest some schools away from this church in favour of other patrons in a phased manner. It alludes to the politics of class interests and school geographies, by explicitly noting that belief systems may not be the foundational preoccupation of (Catholic) families in their orientation towards education. It also includes research with young people on their experiences of religion, ethics and education. However, it persists in locating the power of that divesting 'within' families and their choices: parents were recently surveyed locally on their preference of patron, symbolically using 'parent power', via the state, to transform local school spaces (Coolahan et al. 2012).

Research on religious agency in childhood and youth that draws predominately on relational, subjective and socio-economic/materialist perspectives has become a quickly growing social research focus in recent years. Such work questions privatised, adult-centric accounts of religious identification in childhood that present children as passive recipients of petrified knowledge (REMC 2008; Hopkins et al. 2011). Hemming and Madge (2012) conceptualise child religious identity as four-fold "(1) affiliation and belonging; (2) behaviours and practices; (3) beliefs and values; and (4) religious and spiritual experiences" (2012: 40). This approach attempts to situate intersections of 'religious identity' within the micro and macro-politics of wider identification processes. More specific empirical examples include Devine (2009) and Moinian (2009). From a cultural-materialist perspective, Devine (2009) analyses the ways migrant children and families in Ireland develop social and cultural capital through 'Arabic' weekend schooling and Nigerian Pentecostal churches. Devine (2009) notes how certain children may overtly contribute to the process of family 'capital accumulation' in education by acting as interpreters for parents, a practice which somewhat subverts the traditional intergenerational ordering of home-school and adult-child relationship. This interaction of meaning-making, symbolic and material resources emphasises the importance of capitals and the ways they are deployed to define 'religiosity' and difference in specific spaces of struggle such as the school (and schoolyard), church, and home/neighbourhood. Moinian's (2009) account of five Swedish-born children of Iranian parents is a useful case which demonstrates further complexities of children's religious becoming. She notes how their experience of 'Swedish', 'Iranian', 'Muslim' and other spaces (home, school, peer cultures and leisure activities) to a large degree explain their rejection of a coherent identity; in order to explain themselves, the 'insist on a non-identity (human being, just me!), an incomplete and ongoing construction of self" (Moinian 2009: 45). While I agree with Moinian's reading of the children's agency/meaning-making, it is also arguable that the possibility of 'being a complex child self' may be closed down by the impossibility of interpellating such a self in adult-centric discourse. The children's individualised erasure of their multiple positioning across different spatial orders ("I'm just me!") may have greater costs than for them, than for those children who approximate unitary imaginings of 'Swedishness'.

What does this complexity mean for 'coming out religiously?' The assumption of normative criteria admissible under 'being religious' often cites one of two discourses. On the one hand, it can suggest an overly-rational individual subject who freely 'chooses'

to follow a prescriptive, static set of religious values, without reference to the technologies of discipline (materially and culturally situated religious symbols, rituals, spaces) that produce *certain* subjectivities as truly religious (or Catholic, Muslim, etc.), and not others. On the other, it can suggest uniformly dominated subjects of (religious) ideology, without reference to the relative material status and social influence that different people exercise within a given religious group. Instead of suggesting that there is a core to citizens that is lacking in children (i.e. essentially incapable of making religious meaning), or present in them (i.e. they are entirely rational 'choosers' of religious identity), we can think about a decentred child subject who is actively constituted in and through *particular governing rationalities/discursive practices* through which they are afforded and take up particular subject positions (Kitching 2014). My argument is that the hidden limitation of the technology of 'choice' is that it often produces children as passive recipients of petrified religious/moral knowledge from adults who somehow embody universally religious (e.g. Catholic) truths.

The *Making Communion* study
The research was conducted during the 2012-2013 school year with children, young people, parents, and older community members in rural, town and suburban areas of Ireland. It was funded under the Irish Research Council Collaborative Projects Scheme 2012-13. Fieldwork took place in a range of Catholic and multi-denominational (ethnically and religiously homogenous and heterogeneous) school settings, and also in the offices of an outreach and campaigning organisation run by members of the Travelling Community. While focus group and individual interviews were conducted with young people and adults, a range of qualitative strategies was used with the children at the center of the study: those of 'Communion' age (7-8 years old). This included talking to children during role-play, examination of digital videos and photos, drawing, mapping localities, and creating comic-strip stories.

Using 'choice' as a metaphor for religious identification: 4 limits of the discourse
The data (not included in this paper but discussed at the meeting) demonstrates the embedding of a concept of rational, individual 'choice' through the discursive practices of both adults and young people. 'Choice' was presented as a metaphor for how one comes, or *should* come to identify with a particular faith or set of values in modern Ireland. Rather than assume the discourse of 'choice' unilaterally enacts religious freedom, the analysis shows four dimensions of power through which it can be worked to legitimise and realise particular ways of 'becoming religious' in childhood, and to suppress others, or even render them unthinkable.

1. Interviews with parents, teachers and young people constantly articulated the discourse of an acceptable age limitation on 'choice' of religious identification. Across schools, it was largely unthinkable for children to 'choose' to identify religiously. But the metaphor of choice did not capture the complexity of child religious identifications, and it concealed at times, the ambivalence of adults' identifications. The child-level data echoes Hemming and Madge's (2012) conceptualisation of child religious identity as multi-faceted. Far from a notion of choosing to 'be or not be' religious, both adults and children placed differential emphases on affiliation and belonging, beliefs and values, behaviours

and practices and religious and spiritual experiences in situated ways. But as points 2-4 suggest, it was more controversial to discuss other limitations on choice that might complicate its decontextualised, ahistorical rationality.

2. The discourse of choice worked to delimit the possibilities for how children 'come out religiously' in terms of how it *re-centralized the status of Catholic schools* and Catholic culture in the areas we visited. Despite the limited alternatives available, Catholic schools were frequently regarded as schools 'of choice' both by parents and Catholic school staff. Schools operating under other patrons often had to adapt the strategies they used (e.g. after school classes) to suit Catholics above other communities.

3. For certain immigrant (particularly Nigerian) parents, it was not possible to openly discuss race politics with the school or religious institution. Such politics led some to convert their children to Catholicism, while attending Pentecostal church, in order to belong to the dominant Catholic school community and the wider legacy of cultural Catholicism in Ireland (Inglis 2007).

4. Echoing McGrail (2007), classed codes of respectability operated through the manner in which families should present their children for Communion (e.g. dress, behaviour in church etc.), causing tensions between clergy and community regarding the expression of complex forms of religious identification in consumer societies.

Implications
The paper's analysis of the dimensions of power through which child and various adults' religious identities are produced 'troubles' Taylor's (2007) notion of coming 'out' to an 'authentic' religious/other identity. It traces the tension of how notions of authentic religiosity suggest their opposite: inauthentic, or illegitimate aspects to identification. Such 'illegitimate' aspects may include a confrontation of social class, race and adult-child dynamics in the composition of school populations. From a social justice perspective, it is vital to confront the complexities of how children 'come out religiously' through state-sponsored education, both in policy and pedagogy.

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