**‘Catholic schooling with a twist?’ A study of faith schooling in Ireland during a period of detraditionalisation**

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**Abstract**

The role and impact of religion and faith based schools are increasingly debated within a wider context of school reform, rights and plurality in multi-ethnic societies. Ireland represents an interesting case study internationally because of the extent to which Catholic education is structurally embedded as normative across the education system. Yet, Ireland is in a process of detraditionalisation and wider societal changes are occurring. Drawing on Bourdieu and Bernstein, and a mixed methodological study of Catholic secondary schools in one archdiocese, we present a typology of Catholic schooling in transition. This identifies a continuum of Catholicity (from strong to weak) among our study schools that is mediated by dynamics of social class in an increasingly competitive and diverse system. We argue this has implications for considering the role of a recontextualised model of Catholic faith schooling, underpinned by principles of social justice in a multicultural and more secularly oriented society.

**Keywords:** Catholic; Bernstein, Bourdieu, School culture, Leadership

# Introduction

The issue of what makes a ‘good’ school has become increasingly important in recent years giving rise to an expanding field of research (Author 2013; Reynolds et al., 2014). Set within a wider context of neo liberal reform and international comparison across ‘competition states’ (Ball, 2009), issues of school culture and leadership have also come to the fore in understanding the impact of schooling and types of schools, on students (Walker, Lee, & Bryant, 2014). The Catholic schooling system is probably the largest faith based system internationally, educating over fifty million children around the world, yet has received little attention in mainstream educational research (Grace, 2009). Research suggests that among Catholic schools themselves there could be different levels of student impact (Casson, 2013a). Other research in this area has suggested that the culture and ethos of Catholic schools gives rise to a “Catholic matrix for achievement” that foregrounds community around shared values and activities alongside a core curriculum (Grace, 2002).

The role and impact of religion and faith schooling in modern societies is a matter of debate (Arthur & Lovat, 2013; Smyth, Lyons, & Darmody, 2013). Concerns have been expressed for example that such schools are divisive and socially exclusive in addition to undermining children’s capacity for autonomy and independent thought (Marples, 2014). Others argue for the importance of spiritual ideals in public (state) schools (Tan & Wong, 2012; Weisse, 2010) and religious education’s role in cultivating values of informed civic respect in democratic societies (Kaymakcan, 2010; Owens, 2010). Such questions have been raised in more overtly secular societies such as France and the UK (Weisse, 2010; Williams, 2007) especially with regard to the public funding of faith schools (Watson, 2013).

Ireland represents an interesting case study of faith-based education because of the extent to which it is structurally embedded as normative across the education system (Rougier & Honohan, 2015). A state-funded Catholic system predominates providing a very different context than in the USA or the UK where Catholic schools are in a minority and represent a specific choice by parents to opt out of the public system. Over ninety per cent of primary schools in Ireland are classified as Catholic. At second level just under fifty per cent are officially designated ‘Catholic’ schools with the remaining schools, while nominally non-Catholic, nonetheless having a strong Catholic influence at trustee and chaplaincy levels (Rougier & Honohan, 2015). However, the previous symbolic domination of the Catholic church in most spheres of Irish society is declining (Author, 2011; Donnelly & Inglis, 2010). This is reflected in calls for increasing pluralism of educational provision, signalled in a government sponsored review at primary level (Association of Trustees of Catholic Schools, 2012; Coolahan, Hussey, & Kilfeather, 2012) alongside calls for a similar review at secondary level. Declining religious practice among the wider population further results in Catholic schools now educating nominally Catholic students who enter school with little knowledge of the Christian story (Tuohy, 2006). Given the simultaneous decline in religious personnel, an increasing number of Catholic schools now led by principals who are not theologically literate (Tuohy, 2007). In addition, the global rise of managerialism and market oriented education approaches which emphasise outputs, performance and targets (Lynch, Grummell, & Author, 2012) especially among the most marginalised schools, as well as more overt forms of competition for the ‘best’ schools among an actively choosing parental body, have also been observed in Ireland. In the wider field of educational policy there has been a transitioning from what O’Sullivan (2005) terms a ‘theocentric’ to a ‘mercantile’ paradigm that would seem to be particularly at odds with Catholic education’s values (Grace, 2002).

Consequently, research into Catholic schooling in Ireland is particularly apposite at this time, including how wider societal changes in a process of detraditionalisation (Boeve, 2006; Author, 2011) impact the wider field of policy making. This is reflected in recent moves at a policy level to endorse diversity of provision in school governance, as Catholic school patrons must now ‘compete’ (based on surveys of parental preference in the local community) along with other patrons to have their faith reflected in the governance of any new schools being built. For Catholics, this requires an articulation of what is distinctive to ‘their’ school model which includes both an appeal to the wider ‘market’ of educational choice and provision as well as reflection on what it means to be a ‘Catholic’ school.

The remainder of the paper presents an outline analysis of perceptions of the distinctiveness (or otherwise) of Catholic second level schools in one archdiocese in Ireland. We were interested to identify how these wider dynamics were influencing what was taking place in Catholic secondary schools in terms of mission and identity. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu and Bernstein among others, we present a typology of Catholic Schooling that identifies a continuum of Catholicity (from strong to weak). We argue that this has implications for considering the meaning of faith schooling (Catholic faith schooling in particular) in a wider changing social and policy related context.

# Theorising Catholic schooling

Pierre Bourdieu has written extensively on practices in education. In addition, his core concepts have been much used as “thinking tools” by scholars of religion (Rey, 2007). Of particular use to this research is Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*: “systems of durable, transposable dispositions” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72) within individuals. A collective habitus (*collusio*) exists where members of a group judge and act in particular contexts in ways that are mutually understood but without there being any conscious communication. An experience of the world as self-evident (*doxa*) occurs when the structures of the world have been internalised in the habitus of the agent. Bourdieu also uses the concept of *field* to explain the social space in which agents are dynamically positioned according to the power (*capital*) they possess which they constantly struggle to preserve or transform. Capital can be observed in several ways: cultural, social, economic and religious[[1]](#footnote-1). Applied to the study of Catholic schooling, these concepts provide a way of thinking about dispositions, power and culture in Catholic schools.

Basil Bernstein’s (1996) core concepts of classification and framing are also useful. *Classification* is a way of understanding power which creates boundaries between categories. The more strongly that a category is insulated from another (strong classification) the greater the space (silence) between them giving rise to unique identities and voices. Bernstein uses the concept of *framing* to understand how communication is controlled within categories with regard to either the regulative order (expectations regarding character) or the discursive order (rules regarding the sequencing and selection of knowledge). Strong framing leads to visible pedagogies, while weak framing leads to invisible pedagogies (Bernstein, 1990). Bernstein views school culture as comprising the instrumental order (a school’s formal aspect) and the expressive order (character training, beliefs and morals). It is the expressive order that potentially binds the whole school together as a source of the school’s shared values especially through the use of consensual rituals (for example: assemblies or signs) (Bernstein, 1975).

Studies of schooling’s impact on students have considered this along intersecting layers of practice that take place at the level of students, classroom, school and the wider community/society (Author et al., 2013). Integrating with the work of Bourdieu and Bernstein, we consider the practice of Catholic education in terms of levels of action (see Figure 1).

At Level 1, at the centre of a Catholic school each individual (student, parent, teacher, principal) brings their habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) comprising various identities and positionings arising from for example gender, ethnicity, social class, faith, and knowledge. Of these, their religious habitus will generate dispositions towards religion and faith, that is, their dispositions towards spiritual capital (Grace, 2010). Their knowledge habitus will generate dispositions towards the purposes of schooling and knowledge (Bernstein, 1996). Particular dispositions of school leaders will lead to practices which allocate resources (time, personnel or finance) towards or away from religious activities. At Level 2, Catholic schools will attempt to frame the communication of those values that they consider important and worth preserving through the use of various consensual rituals of the expressive order (Bernstein, 1996; Bourdieu, 1986). In Catholic schooling such rituals (religious activities, physical environment, interpersonal relationships, and the influence of the founding religious orders’ charisms) are those expressions of the “resources of faith and values” which forms the spiritual capital of Catholic schooling (Grace, 2010, p. 125). Level 3 is concerned with the leadership level of action in Catholic schools. School principals not only are shaped by their own dispositions (Author, 2013) but are also in a position of power whereby they have been invested with the authority to act and speak on behalf of the entire group (Bourdieu, 1986). Indeed, a school leader’s spiritual capital is crucial in preserving the distinctiveness of Catholic schooling (Grace, 2002) and balancing the tension between secular demands and faith mission (Grace, 2002; Sultmann & Brown, 2011). Ordinarily, principals control their schools’ boundaries with regard to the admission (and expulsion) of students (and school personnel), and have operational control over the transmission of the schools’ message (framing) achieved through the regulative and discursive orders (Bernstein, 1996). If a principal places a strong emphasis on the transmission of Catholic values and practices by allocating resources (time, personnel, finance) then it can be said there is strong framing.

Level 4 is concerned with the wider field of Catholic schooling. Each school is ultimately positioned within a social space in which several agents operate with varying degrees of power within this field. Within the Irish context, major positions of power are taken up by the managerial organisations, the teaching unions and the Department of Education and Skills which also places multiple demands on schools. With an increase in accountability and performance-led appraisal, there is an increasing emphasis on measuring the ‘outputs’ of schooling (Author et al., 2012). In addition, the Catholic church exercises a position of power through its hierarchy and through educational trusts which various religious orders and congregations have established in recent years (Association of Trustees of Catholic Schools, 2012; Darmody & Smyth, 2013). Student and parent national organisations are also present in this field. Finally, and increasingly within a wider neo-liberal context, schools can be viewed as competitors to one another offering their services to “consumers” in a competitive space in which Catholic schools are one of a number of options available (O'Sullivan, 2005).

The greater the extent that the levels of action are in harmony and strongly aligned with each other, the more strongly classified (having a distinctive voice and identity) a particular Catholic school will be relative to non-Catholic schools (Bernstein, 1996) (see Figure 1). If a common habitus is shared among the members of the school community – especially in terms of their religious identity – they may experience *collusio*, a collective habitus grounding each one into the group’s doxa (Bourdieu, 2000; Rey, 2007). Alternatively, the less the extent that the levels of action are in harmony and are weakly aligned with each other, the more weakly classified a particular Catholic school will be. Its boundaries will be permeable and it will have a less distinct Catholic voice and identity. The remainder of the paper details the findings of a mixed methodological study into Catholic schooling in a sample of secondary schools in Ireland, drawing on the levels of action noted in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Strongly classified school (Levels 1, 2, 3 & 4 strongly aligned)

# Methodology

Our study adopted a parallel mixed methods design (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009) in which both qualitative and quantitative data were collected simultaneously and then integrated together (Creswell, 2009). Figure 2 provides an overview of the study design which was divided into two phases.

**Figure 2: Overview of research design**

Semi-structured interviews took place with a representative sample of thirty-seven principals out of the one hundred and ten ‘Catholic’ designated schools within the archdiocese of Dublin. These interviews focused on issues related to principals’ professional and faith background, their role, perception of the distinctiveness of Catholic schools, religious and social formation, and building community. This more general overview of practice (in our wider interview of thirty-seven principals) was concurrently supplemented in Phase 2 with intensive case study analysis in five second level schools involving focus group interviews with thirty-five students, seventeen parents and eighteen teachers (see Table 1). In addition, questionnaires with a subsample of three hundred and forty-two students were collected in these case study schools which explored their views of school life and their attitudes towards faith and learning. It also included a scale on ‘connectedness to school culture’ (Rovai, 2002). The study adhered to all ethical guidelines, secured through the University Human Research Ethics Committee.

**Table 1: Case study schools**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **School pseudonym** | **Fota Island** | **Rathlin Island** | **Garinish Island** | **Lambay Island** | **Clare Island** | **Totals** |
| **DEIS[[2]](#footnote-2) or Fee paying?** | DEIS | DEIS | DEIS | Fee paying | Fee paying |  |
| **Student gender** | single sex boy | single sex girl | co-educational | single sex boy | single sex girl |  |
| **Student Questionnaire**  | 22 | 59 | 74 | 134 | 53 | **342** |
| **Student interviews** | 5 | 9 | 6 | 7 | 8 | **35** |
| **Parent interviews** | 2 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 5 | **17** |
| **Teacher interviews** | 0\* | 5 | 4 | 4 | 5 | **18** |

*\*No focus groups took place with teachers in this school due to school-based issues beyond this research’s control*

The remainder of this paper will present the findings in the context of a typology of Catholic second level schools which emerged through integration of our theoretical frame with the study data.

# Shifting boundaries – a typology of Catholic second level schools

We were able to discern a distinctiveness across our school sample, that suggests a typology of Catholic schools that appears to function along a continuum of catholicity that is reflected across the four levels of action noted in Figure 1. This typology arose in the first instance from our exploration of the experience of thirty-seven principals: in their perception of their role as leaders; in the perceived distinctiveness (if any) of their school; and in their narratives around discipline, community, religious formation, and academic learning. It was supplemented by our deeper immersion in the cultures and practices of our five case study schools.

Three types of school were found to exist: strongly classified Catholic schools (which we term ‘Faith-Visible’), moderately classified Catholic schools (‘Faith-Transition’) and weakly classified Catholic schools (‘Faith-Residual’). These schools may be considered as ‘ideal’ types rather than definitive. These three ‘ideal’ types will be explored according to the levels of action in our theoretical framework.

## Type 1: Faith-Visible schools – institutionally reconfessionalised

Across our entire sample, one third of the principals interviewed (13 schools) perceived there to be a distinctiveness in their schools arising out of its catholicity, reflected in Table 2 below. These were the Faith-Visible Schools: strongly classified Catholic schools having a distinct Catholic voice and identity.

Fee-paying schools and strongly committed Catholic principals were over-represented among Faith-Visible Schools and analysis of the demographic profile of students suggests that Faith-Visible Schools were mainly majority ethnic (white/traditional Irish) Catholic middle class schools.The habitus of participants in these schools was immersed in positive dispositions towards faith and an emphasis on religious practices. Principals in these schools were less tolerant of non-Catholic students opting out of R.E. classes or religious services. However, in our scale exploring student’s sense of morality (“Religion in Practice: Moral Actions Scale”), in the case studies, it was students in two of these Faith-Visible schools who were least likely to consider certain behaviours as morally wrong. This signals some contradiction between the outward and visible expression of catholicity and its internalisation by students in these schools.

Casson (2013b) and Mifsud (2010) note that Catholic school cultures tend to be marked by a strong liturgical life (especially the Eucharist), by a distinctly visible physical environment and by a strong communal aspect which is the ‘backbone’ in which its Catholic ethos subsists. In addition in spite of the decline in religious personnel, religious orders provide a shared identity and inner heritage through their charisms. Conceived as framing activities (Bernstein, 1996), our faith visible schools have an emphasis on building a distinct community, have a greater occurrence of religious activities with a notable increase in Catholic religious iconography in recent years.

A number of leadership practices comprise the activity in level 3. Catholic school principals are challenged with increasing admission of non-Catholic and non-practicing-Catholic students in Ireland, teacher recruitment, the allocation of time to religious activities, and maintaining effective yet ‘forgiving’ discipline systems (ATCS, 2012). The leadership in our Faith-Visible schools perceive that the role of principals in Catholic schools is different than if they were in non-Catholic schools.

In a Catholic school it’s not that everything is better. But that there has to be that core belief that faith matters. It transforms the way in which we experience the world … it’s a point you come back to. *(Ms. Murphy, Fee-paying, girls secondary school)*

This can be seen particularly in time allocated to religious activities and the way in which disciplinary decisions are taken. These principals were more likely to promote the catholicity of their schools to parents prior to the admission of their children into these schools reflected in Mr. Culligan’s comment below:

It’s not good enough to say you are a Catholic school. I think you have to be seen to be a Catholic school. … you have a brand and you have to be seen to work it basically. *(Mr. Culligan, Fee-paying boys secondary school)*

Faith-Visible Schools’ actions must be considered within the wider social and policy context in which Catholic schooling – especially through their trustees – have begun to emphasise the Catholic dimension of leadership in their schools. Recently, in Ireland, religious orders have been placing the governance of their schools into various lay trusts (for example Le Cheile, CEIST), and two new national Catholic educational bodies have been established: the Catholic School Partnership and the Association of Trustees of Catholic Schools (Darmody & Smyth, 2013). Faith-Visible principals were more likely to express a frustration at the lack of training they had received to be principals of Catholic schools, reflecting concerns noted elsewhere (Tuohy, 2006). This was all the more significant as Faith-Visible principals were also more likely to view their schools as the new parishes for young people in an increasingly secular/detraditionalising society.

We tell them when they’re enrolling that ‘this is a Catholic school’, that we take in non-Catholic but if they sign into the school that they agree that their daughter will partake in all the religious events up to the point that they can: so that they would attend the religious assemblies. *(Ms. Walsh, Fee-paying, girls secondary school)*

## Type 2: Faith-Transition schools – a Christian values education

Across our entire sample of principals interviewed, just in excess of one half (twenty-one) had principals who perceived there to be a distinctiveness in their schools arising out of its catholicity (albeit inconsistently) in some (at least two) of the main research themes. These we identified as Faith-Transition Schools: moderately classified Catholic schools having some distinctiveness in their Catholic voice and identity. As one principal said:

*[Students]* would know that it’s a Catholic school – but a Catholic school with a twist … that there is a *[name of religious order]* twist to it, as opposed to just being overtly Catholic. *(Mr. Culligan, Fee-paying boys secondary school)*

**INSERT TABLE 3 HERE**

Findings indicated that students from minority ethnic and working class backgrounds were significantly more likely to be in Faith-Transition study schools. The habitus of participants in these schools was one characterised by less positive dispositions towards Catholic faith and a perception that among students in these schools that the religious practice rate was low. Overall, the patterns identified are suggestive of a looser traditional Catholic identity with tendencies towards a more individualistic practice of faith. There appears to be a weak emphasis on consensual rituals binding participants into a focused Catholic school identity, with less emphasis on a liturgical and prayer life and a distinct physical environment. Indeed, these rituals may be merely social routines disconnected from their original values and meanings (Bernstein, 1975). In addition, these schools appear to have a weaker community aspect centred on Christianity and principals were more likely to state that Catholic schools do not build community differently than non-Catholic schools. Our data also suggests that the Catholic aspect of Faith-Transition schools is perceived as much like any other aspect (for example sports), as one in which Faith-Transition principals will take occasional and personal initiatives. More to the fore were concerns around the academic reputation and branding of the school and being seen to strive for excellence in what they did:

If we don’t achieve academically we’re not doing our business as a school and we’re in a highly competitive environment. If you don’t achieve academically then people will walk with their feet. *(Mr. Wallace, non-fee paying, boys secondary school)*

In this sense these schools were classic of the move to the mercantile paradigm noted by O’Sullivan (2005), where survival in a highly competitive market of student recruitment was paramount. Principals were less certain that their role in a Catholic school was different than if they had been principals in other schools. Finally, Faith-Transition principals were slightly less likely across our wider study of school principals to mention frustrations or concern with the lack of training for their role as faith leaders.

## Type 3: Faith-Residual schools – institutionally secularised[[3]](#footnote-3)

Across our entire sample, just under one-tenth of the principals interviewed (three out of thirty-seven) could be classified as being Faith-Residual Schools, that is, weakly classified Catholic schools having none or very little perceived distinctiveness in their Catholic voice and identity. In the Irish context, we suggest that this is an emerging type of Catholic school: Catholic schools in their origins which have now become weakly classified from other non-Catholic schools. All three principals were lay principals in middle-class, non-fee paying schools. With only three schools in this typology, our findings here are tentative and derived from interviews with school principals rather than deeper immersion through case study analysis. Nevertheless, it provides a counterpoint to the previous two types in signalling a complete move away from a distinctly Catholic identity as these schools are explicit in their assertion that they are not Catholic. While nominally ‘Catholic’ there is a clear lack of Christian ideology informing what motivates them in their schools.

Table 4: Faith-Residual Schools (summary)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Levels of Action | Principals |
| **Level 1*****Habitus*** | * All refer to student decline in practice of faith.
* None insist non-Catholic students participate in R.E. class
* None insist non-Catholic students participate in religious services (most allow to opt-out)
* Less likely to speak of parental interest in their children’s faith formation
* None spoke of Christian ideology as distinctive element of school
* None referred to distinctive academic approach.
 |
| **Level 2*****Framing*** | * All stated Eucharist important part of graduation rituals
* One school perceived important that school retreats have religious aim.
* Less likely to perceive any distinctiveness in physical environment
* None spoke positively about a sacred space in schools
* Founding religious order gave their school a historical identity
* None perceived Catholic schools built community differently than others
 |
| **Level 3*****Leadership*** | All principals perceived that there was no difference to their role. One principal stressed catholicity of their school to parents prior to entry. Two principals perceived Catholic schools did not take decisions around discipline differently. Two schools ensured suitably qualified R.E. teachers. One school shared a chaplain.  |
| **Level 4*****Field*** | Two were members of religious Trusts. |

These three principals referred to the decline in practice in the organised religious life of their students, with none insisting on participation in religious services or Religious Education classes. Combined, their framing practices seem to suggest that the communication of Catholic values (spiritual capital) is not a priority in Faith-Residual Schools, and has little value (Grace, 2010). Where religious practice continues, it could be tentatively interpreted as a residue of religious practice that is maintained for reputational value, rather than a conscious choice for the communication of the Christian mission. The Faith-Residual principals did not perceive that there was any difference to their role as principal of a Catholic school than if they had been principals of non-Catholic schools. For example, Mr. O’Rourke, principal of a boys secondary school, stated that his school was only ‘Catholic’ in name (and historical fact) and very little else marked it as different to other schools. While another Ms. Brooks, principal of a girls secondary school acknowledged the role of Catholic Schools as being the only place in which young people came into contact with church services, this was said with little conviction. It is noteworthy that two out of the three principals in this type who, despite perceiving their schools’ catholicity as mostly historical, were also members of (two different) Catholic educational trusts which nationally are attempting to emphasise the catholicity of their member-schools. This lack of collusio is indicative of the tensions in the wider field, with an ambivalence toward faith formation by these school principals reflecting an element of Irish society which views faith ambivalently.

What makes it a Catholic school? Historically, the easy answer to that is it’s a *[name of religious order]* school so, therefore, it’s a Catholic school. I could not tell you that there is a whole lot of difference between going into a non-denominational school and walking into our school. *(Mr. O’Rourke, non-fee paying boys secondary school)*

The caring approach is not the sole prerogative of Catholic schools regardless of what Catholic schools would like to think…, every school looks after their students regardless of their religion. *(Ms. Brooks, non-fee paying, girls secondary school)*

I would be brought up Roman Catholic. I changed [faith] last year … because of the situation with the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, and the abuse and so forth. ... faith is an awful lot between the person and God rather than a third intermediary. *(Ms. Brooks, non-fee paying, girls secondary school)*

# Discussion

Our analysis confirms Grace’s (2002) assertion that there is no clear-cut unitary habitus within Catholic faith schools. Within the Irish context, and specifically the archdiocese in which the study was conducted, there appears to have been a shifting of boundaries in the field of Catholic schooling. Catholic schools, traditionally strongly classified in the past, are now perceived to have a much less distinct voice and identity than non-Catholic schools. In addition, while a distinctiveness arose among the cultures of the schools, this is mediated by a complex range of factors (for example: gender, ethnicity, faith, social class or school year of students – beyond the focus of this paper) that are independent of the schools’ classification as Catholic. Nonetheless, from the perceptions of principals, students, teachers and parents in the study, it is clear that patterns emerge from which a typology of Catholic schooling identity can be discerned. A conceptual synopsis of our overall findings is reflected in Table 5 below, showing the different emphases in the levels of action across the three types we have identified.

Table 5: Overall summary of typology (by levels of action)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  **Ideal type****Levels** | **Faith-Visible** | **Faith-Transition** | **Faith-Residual** |
| ***Habitus*** | religious | spiritual | secular |
| ***Framing*** | spiritual capital | social routines | relics |
| ***Leadership*** | proactive | periodic initiatives | indifferent |
| ***Field*** | ‘new parish’ | faith-ambivalent | detraditionalised |
| ***Boeve’s (2006) identity option*** | institutionally reconfessionalised | Christian values education | institutionally secularised |

Certainly, Faith-Visible schools can still be considered to be distinctly Catholic, that is, strongly classified from non-Catholic schools, with a distinct voice and identity. A ‘collusio’ between the levels and among the actors appears to exist. The work of Boeve (2006) is relevant here in his identification of types of Catholic schools and universities in Flanders. Our Faith-Visible schools are similar to his *institutionally reconfessionalised* schools which operate on the assumption that the substantial proportions of the actors in these schools are practicing Catholics. These schools do not engage in dialogue with religious plurality. This seems akin to research which finds that the values and perspectives of children from minority ethnic backgrounds in schools such as these can be overlooked (Author, 2011) as the school works to consolidate a distinctly Catholic faith ethos.

Faith-Visible Schools seem to be strategically repositioning themselves as being distinctly Catholic expending a greater effort to generate and sustain spiritual capital. This may be occurring because of two reasons. Firstly, Catholic schooling in Ireland exists in a wider field of detraditionalisation in the society at large. A pluralism of educational provision, reflecting a more religiously/belief diverse population, is increasingly being called for (Author, 2011). The ‘confessional based identity’ of schools (more closely aligned to a theocentric paradigm in the past) no longer appears ‘doxic’ (Boeve, 2006; Bourdieu, 1977; O'Sullivan, 2005). Secondly, these schools are not immune to the more mercantile and consumerist trend within Irish education (Author et al., 2012; O'Sullivan, 2005). The emergence of a more overt competitive ethos among schools through media publication of school league tables, together with lower state funding support for fee paying schools (resulting in a lower pupil: teacher ratio for these schools) has led to increased competition among second level schools for pupils (Darmody & Smyth, 2013). Given that fee-paying schools (in a minority nationally) are overrepresented among our Faith-Visible Schools, these schools may be repositioning themselves within the wider field as having a Catholic unique selling point or ‘brand’ in order to provide a competitive advantage. In any case, it is clear that Faith-Visible Schools neither fit easily into the theocentric nor the mercantile paradigm noted previously by O’Sullivan (2005).

In addition, these distinctly Catholic schools are more clearly linked with majority ethnic students (traditional Irish) from middle/upper-middle class backgrounds. Fee paying schools with all the attendant advantages in terms of cultural, social and economic capitals are overrepresented among Faith-Visible Schools. As these schools were not the nearest school to students’ homes, our findings indicate the active pursual of school choice by parents with respect to these schools. This suggests that these parents, as agents ‘in the know’ and with access to economic capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) may be positioning themselves at times of social and economic transition in Faith-Visible Schools as a way of preserving and adding to their capital (economic, cultural and social), that may also include a spiritual dimension. Such choices serve to maintain and amplify class and ethnic boundaries in a context of increasing ethnic and social diversification in schools in Ireland (Author, 2011). More broadly, it highlights a tension within the wider field of Catholic education between the Catholic Church’s call to offer its educational service firstly to the poor (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977) and what occurs in practice, especially in an increasingly marketised culture as schools compete over enrolments (O'Sullivan, 2005; Tuohy, 2007).

At the other end of our continuum are our tentatively identified Faith-Residual schools which may be pressurised to drop the title ‘Catholic’. These schools have ‘de-Catholicised’ and are no longer distinguishable from other (secular) schools (Arthur, 2013). They are similar to Boeve’s (2006) *institutionally secularised* schools in which Catholic symbols and rituals have gradually eroded over time. It can be concluded that these schools are (at best) only weakly classified relative to other types of non-Catholic schools and are only nominally Catholic. While some religious practices remain, they seem to be more suggestive of a residue of faith rather than arising from any deeply held convictions (Inglis, 2007). Together with an openness to religious pluralism, currently these schools seem to be neutrally-pluralistic in that the Christian voice is tolerated alongside other voices. However, given that two of our Faith-Residual principals identified personal concerns with the institutional Catholic Church, these schools may become explicitly neutral in the future, eliminating all Christian symbols (Boeve, 2006). Given the increasing pressure currently at primary level for Catholic schools to divest to other (secular) patrons[[4]](#footnote-4), it seems likely that Faith-Residual schools may be the first among those identified for a change of patronage at second level.

Finally, the largest number of schools (located between the two endpoints) was Faith-Transition whose levels of action are weakly and inconsistently aligned with each other across the schools. These schools are moderately classified relative to other types of schools and are similar to Boeve’s (2006) *‘Christian values education’* identity option. The Catholic faith in these schools was gradually reduced to an ethical code detached from the life of faith. It appears that the building of a Catholic school identity through the integration of the necessary pillars and elements of the ‘Catholic matrix’ seem to be weak or absent from Faith-Transition Schools (Sultmann & Brown, 2011). In an increasingly competitive and marketised education system, where parents are actively making choices, it may be that these schools, whose students were predominantly from working class backgrounds, are struggling to survive on the basis of academic reputation and performance. In their attempts to avoid a ‘ghettoisation’ (Author, 2011), one tentative interpretation is that these schools are reducing their education to the essentials of the core curriculum. Consequently, an emphasis on discipline, rather than faith formation, is to the fore so that academic learning (as measured by test/exam performance) can more efficiently take place (Author et al., 2012). Within the wider field of Catholic schooling, there is a distinct possibility that these schools, in an era of detraditionalisation, will easily transition to being Faith-Residual Schools. Indeed, their future within Catholic schooling seems largely dependent on how Catholic leadership responds in terms of dedicated support for faith leadership training, as well as the religious habitus of future principals who from our study appear to be more weakly expressing their role as a faith leader. This is all the more significant, given that our student questionnaire signalled that for some students in these schools, Catholic schools were the closest experience of religious practice that they ever encountered.

Catholic schooling in Ireland is in transition, the apparent *collusio* that existed now more historic than a reality, with a more nuanced analysis of Catholic school identities and cultures required. How schools are positioned in our typology is aligned to wider dynamics of social and demographic change. It is interesting that no school in our study can be classified as similar to Boeve’s (2006) *recontextualised* Catholic school identity which, while consciously recognising the particularity of a Christian/Catholic faith, embraces and welcomes a dialogue with plurality in its core mission. Our analysis suggests that those schools who seek to preserve a distinct Catholic identity are doing so without recognising the plurality of religious positions of students and personnel, nor the changes in general society (Author, 2011; Author et al., 2012). Given that these schools were also more likely to be middle class and majority ethnic, a pattern of ‘inclusion by exclusion’ may prevail (Author 2011), reinforcing wider patterns of stratification and segregation in terms of social class and ethnicity in the society at large.

This has implications for policy makers as they navigate a period of relative flux and uncertainty. For those in the Catholic Church, a weakening collusio between the wider field of Catholic leadership and implementation of policy in practice by school principals may lead to further fragmentation and disharmony. In the absence of an articulation by Catholic leaders of the place of Catholic schooling in a multicultural and more secularly oriented society (Weiss 2010), and corresponding embedded leadership support for school principals, a further drift away from faith based schooling is likely.

The place of religion and faith schooling in society is increasingly being explored internationally. New ‘religio-secular public spaces’ are appearing in which secular and faith-based sectors work in pragmatic partnerships seeking solutions to common problems (Baker & Miles-Watson, 2008). In the wider field of state policy in Ireland, account needs to be taken of the multi-faceted nature of a predominantly Catholic schooling system in transition. Yet even without state intervention, it is clear that at school level organic change is occurring. As our Faith-Residual Schools would suggest, some schools have already ‘de-Catholicised’. Policy needs to be formulated around the role of faith-schooling in a state-funded system (Author, 2011). Indeed, a process is currently being played out within the primary school system as the State more actively intervenes in regulating admissions to schools independent of faith-ethos.[[5]](#footnote-5) In so doing the State is articulating the need for a more inclusive model of schooling that caters to the rights of those of faith backgrounds and none. Ultimately this may give rise to the development of a *recontextualised* Catholic school model that embeds plurality and recognition of diversity within a redefined mission by Catholic schools themselves (Author 2013). If implemented authentically, foregrounding values of social justice, this has the potential to counterbalance more neo-liberal marketised approaches that are currently emerging. It could also contibute to a more pluralistic approach to values education in a detraditionalising society.

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1. Bourdieu (1991) uses the term ‘religious capital’ in a narrow sense as religious language and access to the sacraments and sacred texts. Other authors – especially Grace (2002, 2010) – have built on this and prefer the term spiritual capital. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The vast majority of secondary schools are state funded and non fee-paying. Those receiving additional state subvention arising from marginalisation are referred to as DEIS schools – Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools. A minority of schools (fifty-one) remained in the fee paying scheme – abolished in 1966 – of which two-thirds are Catholic. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. While there were no strictly Faith-Residual schools among the case study schools, elements of this school type were discernible among the participants in the wider interviews of school principals. (The sampling of the case study schools was completed prior to the typology’s development.) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A key recommendation of the state sponsored Forum on School Patronage (Coolahan et al., 2012) that some primary schools under Catholic patronage be divested to cater for a more diverse faith/belief population has met with considerable resistance at local level with very few schools being divested. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A new school admissions bill is currently being proposed that would require schools to give priority to local children rather than to those of the faith denomination of the school which would be more akin to the recontextualised Catholic school identity model. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)