

Article

# Identity, Ambiguity, and Professionalism: Dilemmas for the Diocesan Advisor in the Republic of Ireland

PJ Sexton <sup>1,\*</sup> and Catherine McCormack <sup>2,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Policy and Practice, DCU St Patrick's Campus, Dublin City University, D09 DY00 Dublin, Ireland

<sup>2</sup> Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, V94 VN26 Limerick, Ireland

\* Correspondence: pj.sexton@dcu.ie (P.J.S.); catherine.mccormack@mic.ul.ie (C.M.)

**Abstract:** A deficit in empirical studies regarding the role of the Diocesan Advisor at second-level schools in the Republic of Ireland prompted research in this area. The findings of a study carried out by the authors are outlined in this article. Perspectives of 19 Diocesan Advisors were gathered qualitatively. The concept of “visible” and “invisible” maps provided a framework. In Ireland, State inspection relies on visible mapping of inspection processes that are accessible to all stakeholders. The Diocesan Advisor, on behalf of the bishop, uses invisible maps, observing how the school is living out its Catholic remit and how religious education is carried out within the curriculum. The study identified that the role is under-resourced and lacks clarity, resulting in a widespread deficiency in the monitoring of Catholic schools’ identity and the non-examinable religious education currently on the curriculum. The study further revealed an uncertain future for the role of the Diocesan Advisor in a changing landscape. A discussion on the implications of the findings is included, and possible options for the role in the future are explored.



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## 1. Introduction

Change is inevitable in a transition to a post-traditionalised society (Breen and Reynolds 2011; Breen and Healy 2014; Inglis and MacKeogh 2012). Demographic trends in the Republic uphold this view (Census of Population 2016; European Social Survey 2002–2012). In the Irish Republic at the time of the Second Vatican Council, only 3.5% of the population were born outside of Ireland; by 2011, that figure was 18% (European Social Survey 2002–2012). In a country where the State recognised the special position of the Catholic Church in the Constitution up to 1972, this is stark. Breen and Healy (2014) assert that the overall change in religious identity in Ireland is moving rapidly towards European norms, with increased secularism and the diminishment of religious belief, belonging, and behaviour. Research abroad identifies many of the implications of such shifts for Catholic schools, and instruments for assessing Catholic schools’ identity have also emerged (NS-BECS, ECSI instruments: Post-critical Belief Scale; the Melbourne Scale and the Victoria Scale).

While there is no study on the identity of the Diocesan Advisor at second-level schools in Ireland, a recent study on the identity of teachers in various denominational schools was carried out in Hungary (Pusztai et al. 2021). Results show that there are only slight differences in teachers’ values within denominational schools, and these are linked to individual teachers’ religious affiliation rather than to the denominations that operate the schools. The marked differences emerged from the value systems of religious and non-religious teachers (Pusztai et al. 2021). Their finding resonates with this study. The Diocesan Advisor is operating in an environment within Catholic schools whereby the personal religious faith and practice of teachers, and indeed, other stakeholders, is diminishing.

In Ireland, the Diocesan Advisor is a person appointed by the local bishop(s) to act in the name of the Catholic Church in relation to the support of Catholic faith in schools

within the diocese. The study reveals that the majority, when appointed, are retired from teaching in Catholic schools. Therefore, their service potential is limited to a few years, resulting in regular turnover. Each diocese fills the position as it sees fit. It can be done informally through *word of mouth* or more formally through interviews. The selection process is not standardised across Ireland. Contracts can vary from one day per week to full-time positions. After the appointment, training is currently ad hoc and informal.

The study aims to explore qualitatively how Diocesan Advisors are negotiating the contested terrain of religious education in a secular landscape. It further examined how the advisors evaluate and support the ethos of the Catholic school in the fulfilment of the canonical requirements of their remit. Nineteen Diocesan Advisors took part in this case study—as a single case with a “revelatory” rationale, given that the role of the Diocesan Advisor has not been researched at second-level schools (age 12–18) in Ireland before. The study sits within an interpretivist research paradigm, where the knowledge is subjectively constructed by the Diocesan Advisors through their interpretation of reality as they engage in their work. Within this epistemological view, to obtain a real-life view of the work of the Diocesan Advisors and their experiences in the role, data were generated through the completion of a five-day solicited researcher-driven diary. The themes drawn from the diary informed the areas of questioning in follow-up one-to-one interviews, and a focus group was held to verify the data.

## 2. Profile of the Research Participants

Of the 26 dioceses in the Republic of Ireland, a total of 19 Diocesan Advisors had some involvement in the data collection process; 10 completed the diaries and were interviewed, and a further 9 participated in either the one-to-one interviews or engaged in the focus group discussion. Seven of the ten diarists had been in the role of Diocesan Advisor for between 1 to 10 years, which would confirm a high turnover of advisors. The interviews were conducted by telephone over the period 4 to 11 March 2019, and the final focus group interview was conducted on 2 May 2019. All participants gave permission for the conversations to be recorded and transcribed for data analysis. Over the 18-month period of the study, there were several changes of personnel in the cohort due mainly to retirement. Participants who had taken up the role after retirement generally had a limited number of years to offer. As a result, there were Advisors who participated in some of the initial data collection elements but were not available for later stages. A further complication arose due to the nature of the contracts held by the participants. Many had one-day or two-day contracts and so did not participate in the five-day diary filling.

## 3. Data Analysis

The data analysis methodology adopted by this research was based on the principles of thematic analysis outlined by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#). Open-ended questioning allowed participants to frame their experiences and interpretations. Theoretical insights were developed from themes that illuminated the world of the interviewee. The findings from qualitative case studies are necessarily contextual and are, therefore, not generalisable to a wider population. Data analysis was conducted using NVivo, a software package that assists researchers in managing and analysing their data ([Figure 1](#)).

T2 - Identity Professional Vs Vocational	15	133
T2.1 - Recruitment	15	70
T2.2 - Training	12	44
T2.3 - CPD	12	32
T2.4 - Reporting	14	27
T2.5 - Support	7	14
T2.6 - Language & Way of Being	4	5
T3 - Ambiguity	23	59
T3.1 - Assessment	11	19
T3.2 - Evaluation	10	12
T3.3 - Inspection	14	22
T3.4 - Handbook	5	6

**Figure 1.** Development of themes using NVivo. Codebook snapshot of Phase 5—Defining and Naming Themes.

#### 4. Context

The Catholic Church is the patron of the vast majority of primary schools in Ireland because, historically, it was the main provider of education for the general population, and the State was happy to allow “peaceful coexistence” to develop just over 50 years ago (Griffin 2019). When free second-level education was introduced into Ireland (1967), large numbers of students availed of the opportunity as it was generally a matter of them continuing on to the secondary school building, usually located in close proximity to the Catholic primary school. Sites for school buildings were provided by religious congregations, who then taught in many schools free of charge or contributed their teaching salaries to support local school projects, claiming *Catholic schools in the voluntary sector are not state entities; the parents of students in Catholic schools are also taxpayers with rights to an education of their choice for their children* (p. 56).

The Education Act of 1998 decrees that each school must have a patron in order to operate. As the numbers entering religious life declined, many congregations discerned the need to change the direction of their ministry. The role of the laity had begun to be recognised after the [Second Vatican Council](#) (1965) and was further acknowledged by legislative developments such as the introduction in 1975 of Boards of Management to schools (Coolahan 1981).

The evolution of lay Trusts occurred from the mid-2000s when congregations transferred their second-level schools to Education Trust bodies. Upholding the characteristic spirit in these schools is the central work of these trust bodies. How individual trusts evaluate or measure the extent of the individual school’s faithfulness to this spirit is undocumented. The Diocesan Advisors role, however, covers all schools regardless of patronage.

The complexity of the language applied to Catholic schools’ mission and identity complicates the work of all those involved in Catholic education. Archbishop J. Michael Miller offers five “non-negotiable” traits which must prevail in Catholic schools: it should be inspired by a supernatural vision, founded on Christian anthropology, animated by communion and community, imbued with a Catholic worldview throughout its curriculum, and sustained by gospel witness (Miller 2006). How this mission is understood by schools in Ireland and how it is honoured is central to the role of the Diocesan Advisor. It is

challenged, however, in a de-traditionalised, post-secular age ([Gleeson 2020](#)), where schools are undergoing significant legislative changes and where Catholic schools are increasingly answerable to State demands ([Treston 2007](#)). [O'Connell \(2012\)](#) examined the nature of the cultural shift in Ireland in recent years, asserting that the landscape for Diocesan Advisors is changing due to the variety of worldviews present in any Catholic school. There are students whose worldview is “shaped by secular atheism, for whom there is no transcendent dimension to life”, students who are “not sure if they believe in God or not” and others again “who believe in God as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ” ([O'Connell 2012](#), p. 1). In addition, [O'Connell \(2012\)](#) states, there are different religious traditions present and a wide spectrum of belief and belonging but laments that “shared understandings have disappeared, and we no longer all speak the same language” (p. 1). The Diocesan Advisors in this context must be able to “enter into dialogue with those outside and within their own faith tradition” (p. 2), and they need to make sense of the viewpoints in a new and changing landscape within the Catholic school and “find clues to faith that can resonate with the experience of whosoever they speak to today” (p. 2).

#### 4.1. Definitions

Currently, the remit for the local bishop's involvement in Catholic schools is outlined in the Code of Canon Law. Canon 803 provides its definition of a Catholic school. Canon 803§1 states that a school is Catholic if (a) it is controlled by a diocese or religious order or another public juridical person or (b) it is acknowledged in a written document as Catholic by the diocesan bishop. In addition, Canon 803§3 states that no school, even if it is Catholic, may use the title Catholic school without the consent of the bishop. When viewed side by side with the State's involvement in Catholic schools in Ireland, the question of how Irish bishops currently resource support for the ethos and religious education of Catholic schools was considered. A handbook entitled *The Role of the Diocesan Advisor for Post-Primary Religious Education* was published by the [Irish Catholic Bishop's Conference \(2013\)](#), and its effectiveness is examined in a changing context.

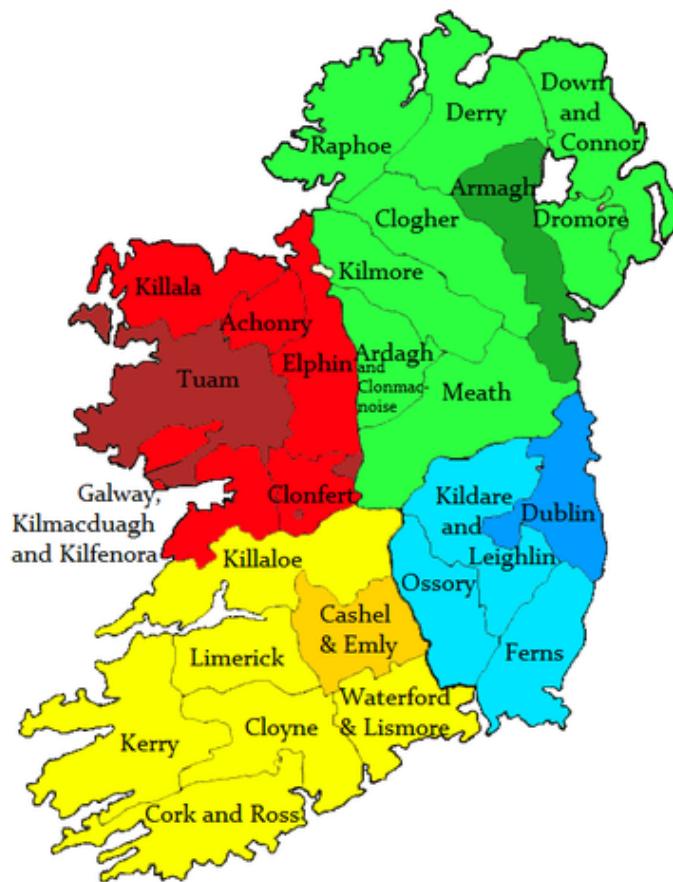
#### 4.2. Religious Education

[Rossiter \(2018\)](#) points to the fluctuation in emphasis for religious education (RE) after Vatican II, whereby *Gravissimum Educationis* (GE), the Roman Congregation for Catholic Education's *The Catholic School* (1977), and *The Religious Dimension in a Catholic School* (1988) (RDECS) refer to the educational activity of RE in an expansive and ecumenical way, while other documents, such as the Roman GCD ([Congregation for the Clergy 1971](#)) and GDC ([Congregation for the Clergy 1997](#)), revert to an ecclesiastical/catechetical interpretation and diminish the educational enterprise in favour of formation, faith, and catechesis. This ambiguity complicates the work of the advisor in educational settings.

#### 4.3. Inspection

Following Vatican II, the Church adapted to a model of *support* for Catholic schools rather than inspection. In each of the 26 Irish dioceses, the bishop or archbishop appoints a Diocesan Advisor to oversee and support religious education and the faith life of the schools in their diocese. Figure 2 shows the diocesan boundaries in Ireland.

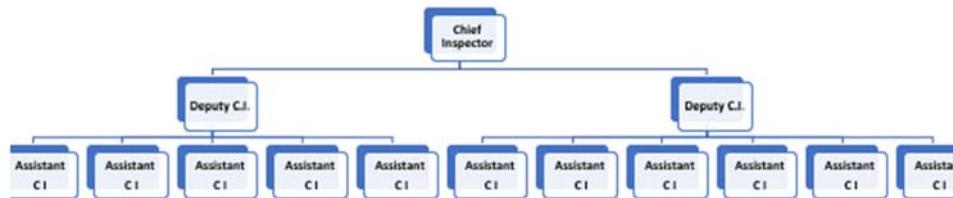
Currently, however, only 3 dioceses have full-time Diocesan Advisors; 4 dioceses employ full-time personnel but also assign other pastoral roles to the DA; 12 dioceses fill the role with part-time DAs (this may be on one day or two days per week or, in some cases, the role is filled by teachers who also teach in a full-time capacity). In six dioceses, the position is currently vacant. One diocese has a different structure, with a broader remit across primary and second-level schools; however, the role is assisted by four associates.



**Figure 2.** Map of the 26 Catholic dioceses in Ireland.

There are 10 duties outlined in the handbook *The Role of the Diocesan Advisor for Post Primary Religious Education* (2013), hereafter referred to as the handbook (2013). They include school visits; supporting and resourcing Religious Education (RE); assisting in the appointment of RE teachers and Chaplains; reporting to the bishop; organising in-service training for RE teachers; engaging with schools and partners in education and linking home, school and parish. There is also a requirement to “evaluate Religious Education”. The handbook states *the evaluation should recognise the strengths of a school’s religious education programme and view any shortcomings in the context of a willingness to assist the school’s authorities* (p11). There is no requirement to inspect any aspect of the school’s Catholicity, however.

Where monitoring or inspection does not occur, Catholic schools can drift from mission ([Byrne and Devine 2017](#)). To answer the critical question, “*Is this a Catholic school according to the mind of the Church?*”, [Miller \(2006\)](#) asks what steps are being taken to improve effectiveness and whether the school is achieving what they say they are (p. 61). This requires a system of inspection, assessment, or evaluation and a set of benchmarks by which the evidence can be measured. Currently, the Catholic Church in Ireland does not have a mechanism for inspection using visible maps, but the State, through the work of the Inspectorate, has refined its systems to an extremely high level ([Hislop 2017](#)). Figure 3 shows that a Chief Inspector is assisted by two deputy chief inspectors and 11 assistant chief inspectors. Each assistant is responsible for a particular region of Ireland.



**Figure 3.** Structure of State inspection (October 2021).

The Inspectorate has a more robust structure. There is a chain of command. The Chief Inspector has two deputies. There are 11 regions, and each region is covered by an assistant chief inspector. All employees are full time and permanent. They provide a comprehensive service of inspection, reporting and support. Their remit includes:

- providing an assurance of quality and public accountability;
- carrying out inspections in schools and centres for education;
- conducting national evaluations;
- promoting best practice and school improvement by advising stakeholders;
- publishing inspection reports on individual schools and centres for education;
- reporting on curriculum provision, teaching, learning and assessment;
- providing advice to policymakers and the wider educational system;
- providing oral feedback to the school community;
- providing a report which is published on the website.

The State inspectorate has a clear identity, a clear remit and is clearly professionalised to provide a rigorous and transparent evaluation of a school and its curriculum.

#### 4.4. National Association of Post Primary Diocesan Advisors (NAPPDA)

Historically, [McConville \(1966\)](#) described the difficulty for Diocesan Inspectors to change the system away from a fear-ridden diocesan inspection. He suggested that inspectors needed to get together and to become organised. Meetings subsequently revealed an uneven and chaotic state of religious instruction in Ireland. By the mid-60s, McConville recognised the need for proper training as a priority for Diocesan Inspectors and identified a lack of stability in the post and frequent turnover of personnel. McConville also noted that some inspectors were “grossly overworked” (p. 721), yet others were finding themselves in only part-time employment. He suggested that regional inspectors could give “each one an opportunity to specialise in one department of religious education so that he might be better able to help the teachers of religious education” (p. 721). McConville concluded that “diocesan isolationism should not continue” and called for a stronger national organisation of Diocesan Inspectors (p. 722) with “closer links with seminary and training colleges” as well as international links to be established with catechetical centres and institutes to benefit from shared knowledge. The organisation formally adopted the name of National Association of Post Primary Diocesan Advisors (NAPPDA) in the late 1980s. The study revealed that few, if any, of McConville’s recommendations were acted upon in the past fifty years.

### 5. Findings

The concepts of *identity, ambiguity, and professionalism* were identified as three key overarching themes in the participants’ narratives.

#### 5.1. Identity

Awareness of the increasingly secular place that many schools have become was found to be the cause of much concern for the Diocesan Advisors in terms of their own identity. One advisor summarised: *We should be comfortable around the dialogue about our role, but we have no definitive positions, and we find it hard to articulate in this changing context.*

The language of Canon Law in relation to the teaching of RE reflects an assumption concerning the identity of the religious education teacher, depicting this figure as a “catechist” who, therefore, is “witnessing” as well as teaching and who has been “formed” for this “mission”. Operating from a strong sense of “vocational identity”, many of the Diocesan Advisors in the study, when commenting on the RE teacher or the principal/headteacher in the school, expressed grave concern at the increasing emergence of a secular identity amongst them. This pointed to negative implications for the future mission of faith formation and the upholding of a Catholic ethos in the classroom and the school. According to another advisor: *The role of the Diocesan Advisor is to help a Catholic student develop and deepen their own commitment to their own faith. The role is about the formation of intentional disciples of Jesus, and the group apostolate is vital.* The identity of the advisor is increasingly at odds within secular school culture. Many feel ill-equipped to address secularism in Catholic schools. *Society has become more secularised; schools, even voluntary schools, are following that route, religious education is becoming more secularised as well. If the pupil has no participation in the faith, then the school is working in a vacuum, and it loses meaning very quickly. The same applies to teachers; you can tell straight away if a teacher is personally interested in the Church and in being part of a Christian community from one who isn't.* Another Advisor commented: *if the principal isn't coming from a faith background, the school can struggle. If the principal is strong in the whole area of faith, then the whole area of ethos in our schools will have a chance.*

Based on analysis of the data, most of the study participants considered that ethos in a Catholic school and classroom-based RE are spaces contested by the State: *There is a massive drive to get rid of the basics of Catholic education, and that is very difficult to deal with.* The advisors expressed concern at the threat to Catholic identity that is posed in an increasingly secular social, political, cultural, and educational landscape, noting that there is a sense of “general crisis in the Church”: *Well, I suppose as a whole, the landscape has changed, and it has changed pretty quickly; there is a sense of a general crisis in the Church and we're just keeping going at the moment.* Further, some of the participants indicated that they were already experiencing a sense of loss in that the traditional identity of the Diocesan Advisor was no longer holding true, leaving them with a view of self as peripheral and with a loss of identity: *We're peripheral to everyone—we're peripheral to the diocese, we're peripheral to the Boards, peripheral to the schools, but we're also peripheral to the teachers—and that's quite a difficult space to be working in.*

## 5.2. Ambiguity

A twofold responsibility of the Diocesan Advisor outlined in the handbook (2013) relates to the provision of support to religious education teachers (and other stakeholders) and the evaluation of their work. The advisors adopted varied approaches to this brief, with some prioritising the provision of support over evaluation, while others prioritised the evaluative element of the role, and yet others completely refrained from conducting evaluations of the classroom or the school: *The role is a little ambiguous despite the well-drafted handbook. It mentions evaluation but I have held back from visiting classrooms. I do see a value in this, but I am not sure if it is part of my role.*

Two advisors spoke about offering support to teachers but keeping a distance from the minutiae of their teaching methodologies and course content, while two others explained that they never conduct evaluations of the Catholic life of the school (*We don't evaluate the Catholic life of the school and we don't evaluate religious education classes and we don't evaluate the Catholic life of the school*), an approach that stood in contrast to that of one DA who viewed evaluation of both religious education and the Catholic life of the school as the *raison d'être* of a Diocesan Advisor (*Evaluating the religious education classes is the primary focus of my work and evaluating the Catholic life of the school is the secondary focus*).

It was concluded that a lack of clarity on the nature of evaluation to be conducted by the Diocesan Advisor means that individual advisors decide whether to evaluate at all and, if so, whether to base their judgements on first-hand experience and observations of the

interactions in the religious education classrooms or to rely on the account of the religious education teacher and/or the religious education coordinator.

The guideline on reporting in the handbook (2013) speaks of “good practice” rather than offering a clearly stated explanation of what the bishop needs to know. The study participants adopted a range of approaches along a spectrum that ranged from the absence of reporting (*Traditionally in my diocese, there hasn’t been any ongoing reporting, the job was given to you and you just got on with it*) to reporting conducted within a clearly defined and inclusive structure (*I benchmark the schools according to the policy position. The reporting procedure is to the patron, the bishop of the diocese, the trustees of the school, the Board of Management, the principal and to each member of the religious education team*).

The reporting approaches were identified as being aligned to either the “vocational” or “professional” living of the role. The “vocational” approach is characterised by informal measures as opposed to the professional systematic approach. As reporting is linked to accountability, the findings suggest that the “vocational” approach operates on an implicit sense of trust underpinning the relationship between the advisor and his/her bishop, whereas the “professional” approach strives towards a more explicit system of reporting that is inclusive of other stakeholders in the field of religious education.

### 5.3. Professionalism

All participants came from the teaching profession; many of them joined the service after retirement as teachers or principals, so, in their own right, they were professional. However, the extent to which professionalism could be identified in their role as Diocesan Advisor is not as clear cut. Analysis of the data suggested that this is not due to any failing on the part of individual advisors but rather to the wider established tradition into which they had been recruited.

#### 5.3.1. Recruitment

Two approaches, “vocational” and “professional”, were identifiable in the data relating to the recruitment and selection procedures in their various dioceses. Some of the Diocesan Advisors described an informal “word of mouth” process: *My recruitment was via a phone call, I was asked to come in and meet our bishop*. By contrast, others recounted undergoing a rigorous process: *The job was advertised on two websites. I applied by sending in my CV. I was subsequently interviewed by two people for the role*.

Most of the advisors outlined their appointment procedure as an informal process, with only three outlining a more formal process. Overall, analysis of their narratives suggests that different routes to the role translated into different approaches to the enactment of the role and different interpretations and understandings of the purpose and meaning of the role. For example, the handbook (2013) stipulates that “the person appointed as Diocesan Advisor must be a person of faith” (p. 4), and the “vocational” informal approach reflects this goal—the potential post-holder would have already been identified as “a person of faith”, eliminating the need for a formal recruitment and interviewing process that might render it difficult to identify the candidate’s background in faith formation.

#### 5.3.2. Contracts

Diocesan Advisors who had been recruited to the role by the “informal route” were employed on a part-time basis, working, in some cases, on a one-day-per-week basis. The three advisors who had come to the role through a more formal recruitment and selection process had full-time contracts. The Diocesan Advisors who belonged to either a religious order or the clergy had complex arrangements because, aside from this role, they were involved in a range of commitments aimed at supporting faith life in the wider community: *I have responsibility for 22 second-level schools, but I also visit and support a large number of primary schools. I am also involved in the diocesan pastoral council, as well as other sacramental preparation inputs*.

### 5.3.3. Training

The handbook (2013) identifies the characteristics, but not the essential qualifications, required for the post. None of the advisors who participated in the study had been formally trained or inducted into the role. The sole source of in-service training for Diocesan Advisors is via the National Association of Post Primary Diocesan Advisors (NAPPDA), offering informal workshops, in-service days, and a forum for discussion. Many aspects of the role require specialist training. One involves the recruitment and selection of religious education teachers and chaplains, a duty that involves making professional judgements, yet no training is provided to equip them for this onerous task.

### 5.3.4. Finances

Some of the advisors expressed concern about the dioceses' ability to fund the role and, thereby, bring it to a higher standard in the future. The importance of the bishop in the success of the whole endeavour was raised by several advisors: *My concern is will dioceses have sufficient financial resources to finance Diocesan Advisors in their diocese in the future?*

## 6. Identity Crisis

The research indicated that Diocesan Advisors currently hold to a broad and diverse range of perceptions as to what their primary foci are and should be. As anticipated, resource issues are a consideration but not necessarily the most significant. Many of the participants were of the view that the future of the role is uncertain.

### 6.1. Identity: Is the Role One of Evangelisation or Education?

The State's understanding of religious instruction is that it equates with faith formation, while in the Catholic tradition, religious instruction is aligned with a religious studies approach and is situated alongside a faith formation approach. Cullen (2013) asserts that a Catholic understanding of religious instruction refers to the academic and interdisciplinary study of the Christian religion in schools in a way that can contribute to catechetical or faith formation and development and, therefore, refers to a more specific educational activity than that understood by its use in the documents of the State. Rossiter (2018) warns that if the language of RE over-emphasises the mission and ministry of the Church; there is a danger of over-emphasising what the subject can achieve, and the distinctly *religious educational* role of the school is obscured. The Diocesan Advisor navigates this complexity in Catholic schools. The background of the advisor further complicates the task, as some are clerics and RE teachers who came into the role with formation, while some are retired principals without a formational element to their primary degree.

Clarification is needed on the distinction elicited from the catechetical and educational approaches within the group, and a decision needs to be made on where the emphasis should lie. If equal emphasis is required, then the educationally oriented advisor needs to be "formed" and needs to apply a catechetical lens as well as an educational one. The handbook (2013) is currently oriented towards the vocational/theological/catechetical approach, and the GDC (1997) makes the distinction that it is the *school* rather than the *classroom* that assists in and promotes faith education (para. 69). This suggests that it is, therefore, the task of the advisor within the whole school that must be catechetical and evangelising rather than in the RE classroom. This distinction is not made in the handbook (2013), however, and its title, *Role of the Diocesan Advisor for Post-Primary Religious Education*, points towards religious education in the classroom as the focus and does not reflect a support system for the principal and other stakeholders.

The advisors themselves held various interpretations of who the service is aimed at. The National Catechetical Directory *Share the Good News* (SGN) (2010) refers to "trained Diocesan Advisors for Religious Education who will support the principal and those teaching Religious Education, encouraging and resourcing the school in supporting and informing the faith of Catholic students" (p. 209). SGN (2010) offers a broader remit of both catechesis and religious education, including the RE teachers and the principal and

speaks of “resourcing the school” and not just classroom religious education. SGN (2010) mentions the support of the principal and an exploration of what that support might look like and what needs to happen. While some of the participants mentioned reporting to principals, none of the participants explicitly mentioned supporting them.

#### 6.2. Faith Leaders in a Catholic School

The need for Diocesan Advisors to support principals in matters of Catholic ethos is timely. [Neidhart and Lamb \(2016\)](#) found that principals are concerned that the next generation of school leaders might lack the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to guide faith leadership in a changing context. [Convey \(2013\)](#) further identified a need for ongoing professional development for all staff as newer members do not share a sense of the importance of Catholic identity to the same extent as longer serving staff members. Upskilling of the Diocesan Advisors is required to facilitate this work in Catholic schools. Partnerships with trustee bodies could also enhance the resourcing of this initiative. The need for Diocesan Advisors to be fully knowledgeable of the rich background to Catholic education outlined in SGN (2010) is essential. SGN (2010) offers an overall perspective on catechesis and details the focus of stakeholders in several domains. Diocesan Advisors would bring an understanding to principals of how they can support the work of catechesis in the Catholic school and the work of religious education in all schools where there are Catholic students.

#### 6.3. Delivery of Religious Education

Educational support for the delivery of classroom religious education needs to be equally resourced and supported. Detailed knowledge of the RE programmes, the most appropriate methodologies, and the opportunities to present RE in keeping with the ethos of a Catholic school all reside in this approach. The work of catechesis supports both a broad remit and a classroom-focused remit. They are not mutually exclusive, and the combination of the two current orientations in the role is necessary if the approach outlined in *Share the Good News: National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland* ([Irish Episcopal Conference 2010](#)) is to be honoured.

#### 6.4. Role Description

A clearer remit is needed to reflect where the emphasis in the role is to be, and much is to be gained by pursuing this through dialogue with other stakeholders. If the emphasis in the role is *educational*, then the advisor must have expertise in education at both the classroom level and, more importantly, the managerial level. It is not enough to be a practitioner oneself; the role must offer more than this. It must offer oversight of the educational remit, understanding the needs of both Church and State.

If it is intended to be chiefly a *vocational role*—to support the catechetical concept of witnesses who can imbue the classroom and school with a rich experience of faith—then a programme of spiritual enrichment needs to be developed and delivered by Diocesan Advisors who are themselves enriched by a depth of spiritual awareness and gifts.

If the role of Diocesan Advisor is, on the other hand, to be an *evaluative role*, with oversight of the quality of the Catholic experience within, then a model of inspection needs to be developed. [Hall et al. \(2019\)](#) claim that experienced or trained inspectors make qualitatively different judgements about what is observed and heard than those of a naïve, inexperienced, or poorly trained inspector (p. 47). The findings reveal that many Diocesan Advisors are under-resourced for this work. The generation of a revised role must not happen in a vacuum, however, and best practice would see it within a process that allows bishops and others to reflect on their remit and their possible contribution and engagement, going forward.

#### 6.5. Seeking Out “Witness” in an Educational Setting

The handbook (2013) states that within the Catholic school, there is an obligation on “catechists” to “impart knowledge” that respects the teaching of Christ and the Church.

However, the Diocesan Advisor is in a difficult position when in a school governed by the State regarding the right to seek out “witness” in a teacher of religious education, as many RE teachers may have undertaken the study of religious education from a purely academic perspective. How to proceed in this milieu is currently a dilemma for the advisor. The need for a detailed job/role description outlining the exact remit in the religious education classroom, as well as in the wider school community, is required.

#### 6.6. Non-Examinable Religious Education

Currently, the State is the accrediting body for the examinable RE programme and inspects it as such, but, outside of the examinable specification, it is not accredited nor inspected for summative or formative assessment or for its value in teaching and learning. The mode of ensuring that the work of faith formation is faithful to the vision of catechesis in SGN (2010) needs to be prioritised. Deenihan (2002) identified the potential weakening of the instructional elements of Catholic religious education where there is little or no oversight of what is happening in the non-examinable RE classroom. Concern for the standards of religious education at the senior-cycle (16–18) level emerged in the study. Currently, advisors do not have a mandate to enter classrooms, and where this has occurred, it is generally due to traditional practice or goodwill: *The work we do is based on historical relationships as opposed to legislation or any other grounded framework as to why we visit*. The legality of these classroom visits could be challenged, and to regularise the practice, bishops need to take ownership and set standards and benchmarks that can be assessed formally. The Diocesan Advisor will then have a justifiable reason to be in the classroom. The RE teacher in this context would receive feedback and acknowledgement for the work they are doing and indicators as to how the work could be improved within a Catholic framework.

#### 6.7. “Ongoing Crisis”

A sense of crisis is understandable from the perspective of a Diocesan Advisor and, indeed, other Catholic stakeholders in the field of religious education in today’s Ireland. As Griffin (2019) explains, there had been a long-standing historical arrangement between the Church and State, whereby the two had lived in “peaceful coexistence” with clear boundaries in terms of the provision of Catholic religious education—the Church was responsible for the religious education classroom, and the State did not interfere. Within such a framework, Catholic education stakeholders had a clearly defined identity that they could take for granted and did not need to question it or its relevance. This is no longer the case.

Several of the participants recounted experiencing a sense of isolation and disconnection, articulating how the role had “gradually been eroded”, rendering the Diocesan Advisor “peripheral” to the workings of the diocese, and concluding that “that’s quite a difficult space to be working in”. The narratives of the *vocational* cohort expressed foreboding about the impact of cultural and legislative changes. These advisors are more strongly linked to the Church by virtue of their vocation and report a general crisis in the Catholic Church. A review of the handbook of 2013 and a plan to train those tasked with supporting Catholic religious education in a secular culture is urgently required.

#### 7. Ambiguity: “Some Uniformity in the Role and Then Some Clarity on It”

The handbook (2013) addresses accountability to the bishop and other stakeholders, stating that Canon Law assigns the role of the oversight to the local bishop ([Code of Canon Law 1983](#), #801–806). The Diocesan Advisor is appointed by the bishop in the exercise of this pastoral responsibility. The 2013 handbook refers to the inspection provided by the State, and, in aligning the role with State inspection under Canon Law and signifying that it is duly assigned to the Diocesan Advisor, there is an inherent implication that something is being inspected or evaluated. However, this is not the case currently. State inspection has sought to bring about evaluation for purposes of knowledge, accountability, and improvement ([Chelimsky 1997](#)). The State has devised a professional and thorough

system for the implementation of this using “visible maps” ([Olsson 2007](#)). There is clarity in the approach taken by the State.

### 7.1. Co-Professional Evaluation

[Hislop \(2017\)](#) claims that the Inspectorate is getting inspection and evaluation “right”, particularly regarding the commitment to co-professional evaluation of schools. The Catholic Church might consider seeking a co-professional arrangement with the State Inspectorate in evaluating Catholic religious education and the Catholic identity of a school. [Hislop \(2017\)](#) refers to examples of collaboration: Teagasc, the agricultural development authority, sought briefings on quality measures for agricultural colleges using the co-professional and collaborative approaches developed for the schools’ sector (p. 17). On a much larger scale, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in 2015 asked for the Inspectorate to develop an education-focused inspection of early years’ provision. If Ofsted and the Catholic Church can collaborate in Britain and Wales, and the Inspectorate in the Irish Republic has already collaborated with diverse groups to develop co-professional models of inspection, the opportunity for the Catholic Church to seek cooperation and direction from the Inspectorate is timely.

### 7.2. Reporting Mechanisms

In the Inspectorate, reports are central to the inspection process and provide visible maps for stakeholders. Most of the participants in the study submit a report to the bishop annually. Currently, the reporting mechanisms are haphazard and somewhat informal in many instances. They do not offer detailed standardised outcomes that are benchmarked against agreed criteria set by all stakeholders. The reports are not available to parents and other stakeholders, and there is no evidence that the reports provide a springboard for addressing deficits in current practices where they exist. There is an urgent need to identify what needs to be known and who needs to know it. It is difficult for the advisor to exercise their role in the contemporary climate outside of a policy framework and outside of clarification as to what their contribution is in the overall scheme of things. The advisor is grappling with identity issues, the need for clarity on the meaning and purpose of the role, where it fits within a wider set of relationships, and the need for professionalism in the role.

## 8. Professionalism: “If the Role Was Done Properly, Schools Would Have More Confidence in It”

The findings show that the Diocesan Advisor operates in the professional context of a school, with a vocational mission sometimes not fully aligned with the professional skills required to support other professionals. Professionalising the aspects of the role that require specialist knowledge is, therefore, urgently required.

### 8.1. Organisational and Occupational Professionalism

According to [Evetts \(2011\)](#), there are two different forms of professionalism in knowledge-based, service sector work. These are defined as “organisational” and “occupational” professionalism (p. 7). *Organisational* professionalism uses hierarchical structures of authority. Accountability is by means of externalised forms of regulation, target setting, and performance review, thus sitting well within the State’s model of inspection using visible maps. *Occupational* professionalism is constructed with collegial-based authority; discretion is applied, and trust is part of the clients’ and employers’ understanding of the role. This sits well with the advisors’ approach currently and is based on the invisible mapping of outcomes. The occupational professionalism that currently exists is from “within” the Church. The Church negotiates the role with the advisor and is not answerable to external agencies. However, in the role of advisor in a school context, the boundaries extend further than the Church due to the educational enterprise of the field within which the advisor works. This field requires both occupational and organisational professionalism from those who are involved. The Church, as the employer of the advisor, must be seen to apply

organisational systems to the role on par with the standards applicable to other areas in the field of education. This must be addressed if the role of Diocesan Advisor is to continue in the professional sphere of education.

#### 8.2. Recruitment Processes

The mode of recruitment was held up to scrutiny in this cohort of participants, and the findings show that it is currently undertaken in a variety of ways. All other professional school personnel undergo rigorous selection procedures. The process is thorough and professional. The filling of the role of Diocesan Advisor should be taken in a similarly rigorous fashion, appointing people who can go on to support principals, Boards of Management, and teachers in the role, according to the ideals set out in SGN (2010). Unless the role is pitched at this level, stakeholders may not have confidence in the relevance of the role to the school community.

#### 8.3. Training

Sexton (2007) identified professional traits, including the presence of a recognisable knowledge base. For the study participants, there was no uniform knowledge base, and this gave rise to different approaches in enacting the role. There is no set training schedule upon appointment, and many merely mirrored what the predecessor had done. The need for training, considering the complexity of the landscape, is evident. An extensive degree of autonomy is also identified by Sexton (2007) as a trait of professionalism. The participants could all be said to have this degree of autonomy, but sometimes this autonomy slipped into isolationism in a changing landscape. Another trait sees professionalism as intellectually based with extended training (Sexton 2007), and while the participants did not complain about the level of intellectually based training and continuous professional development, the shortfall in expertise left some feeling adrift. The participants all embody what Locke (2004) refers to as the service attribute, with a keen sense that a vocation or call is at the heart of their work.

#### 8.4. Contracts

The nature of the advisors' contracts currently reflects an extremely limited sense of the involvement of the diocese in the work of religious education and in the wider remit of catechesis in the whole school. Contracts are not currently standardised, and many participants took up the role almost as a gesture of goodwill to the bishop after serving a lifetime of teaching in a Catholic school. Others serve in their capacity as clergy or as serving within religious life and often fit the role into a very demanding and busy parish schedule.

#### 8.5. Information Compilation

A decision regarding the extent of responsibility that the advisor has for the oversight of ethos across the school, as distinct from their remit with RE teachers, is required. If the advisor is to be charged with this responsibility fully, then perhaps cooperation could be sought from patrons and trust bodies on the nature of the information needed and the resourcing and dissemination of this. Otherwise, there is the risk of overlap of provision. Diocesan Advisors could lead the way and include opportunities for dialogue with patrons if they are adequately trained in all specialised areas of ethos in a Catholic school and if they are employed in a professional full-time capacity. Linking with the recently formed Catholic Education Partnership (CEP) would be beneficial regarding possibilities of collaboration with and for Catholic schools.

#### 8.6. Finance

The bishop is central to the question of financial decision-making with regard to the support of Catholic schools. McConvile (1966) suggested that two or three smaller dioceses could combine to resource an advisor between them. A model whereby regional, highly

trained diocesan specialists could coordinate the service might also work. Investment in professional structures to support Catholic schools and in the Diocesan Advisor to oversee them is urgently required.

#### 8.7. Professionalisation

While professionalism refers to the practice and behaviours of the individual, professionalisation relates to the occupation per se (Hoyle 1980). The individual advisors in this study are professional by virtue of their previous qualifications as teachers, but the findings identified a lack of professionalism in the workings of most of the dioceses in relation to the role. The three key failings identified in the study were lack of clarity, low levels of accountability, and lack of training, leading to role confusion. Role-specific training for all stakeholders, not just advisors, is a necessary first step in developing a shared understanding of Catholic ethos. If all stakeholders understood their roles, then the advisor could focus on supporting them. The findings showed that the National Association of Post Primary Diocesan Advisors (NAPPDA), while beneficial, does not offer role-specific comprehensive training or academic modules leading to accreditation.

### 9. Further Recommendations

Other jurisdictions have invested in evidence-based data-gathering instruments. In the United States, the National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools (NSBECS) developed such an instrument (Ozar and Patricia 2013). Research conducted over two years (2015 and 2016) confirmed its benefit as a framework for assessing and improving Catholic school effectiveness (Ozar and Patricia 2013). The NSBECS are based on nine characteristics, which summarise Church teaching on the Catholic identity in Catholic schools. Within 4 domains (Mission and Catholic Identity, Governance and Leadership, Academic Excellence, and Operational Vitality), there are 13 standards describing policies, programmes, structures, and processes expected to be present in effective Catholic schools; 70 benchmarks provide observable, measurable descriptors for each standard. Ozar and Patricia (2013) found that the top four success indicators were: when faculty and staff buy-in was established; when commitment was given by diocesan leaders; when respectful engagement with relevant stakeholders was fostered; and when data and evidence were used to measure outcomes and to make decisions. In the current Irish context, there is evidence of a willingness to improve when professional structures for evaluation, improvement, and accountability are offered. The responses of the Boards of Management to whole-school evaluations by the Inspectorate is a case in point. Boards and school management highly value the reports emanating from the inspection process (Dillon 2012). Good practice is highlighted, and recommendations for moving to a highly effective standard are offered. Critiques are fair and factual. A thorough and professional approach such as this is essential for Catholic schools' Boards of Management to approach the evaluation of the Catholic ethos of the school across several domains. Two factors that may impede the rollout of this type of implementation have been identified in the study by Ozar and Patricia (2013), which are time pressure and lack of personnel to implement the benchmarks. If Catholic patrons are willing to conduct such a thorough investigation into Catholic identity, it may well benefit from a collaborative approach with the State Inspectorate, whereby the Church and State conduct inspections in tandem. Britain and Wales use such a system with the Office for Standards in Education and Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) under Section 48 of the Education Act 2005.

In Australia, the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria commissioned the research project *Enhancing Catholic School Identity* (2009) (ECSI). An empirical instrument, the *Post Critical Belief Scale* (PCBS), based on the typology of Wulff (1991, 1997), was developed by Duriez et al. (2000) and modified by Fontaine et al. in 2003 and again by Duriez et al. (2005). The instrument is used to capture two orthogonal bipolar dimensions of Exclusion versus Inclusion of Transcendence and Literal versus Symbolic Belief. School stakeholders' responses can be plotted in one of the four quadrants issuing from the in-

tersection of the vertical axis with the horizontal one. Specific attitudes toward religion are identified. The PCB scale and two further instruments have been developed with the cooperation of the faculty of Theology and Religious Studies in KU Leuven. They are the Melbourne Scale and the Victoria Scales, and both help to classify a school in relation to aspects of its Catholic identity. The Melbourne Scale offers five categories and investigates institutional identity via participants' views on the desired qualities of a Catholic school versus the operational reality. The Victoria Scale categorises schools into four domains of professional identity according to the overall acceptance or rejection of a Catholic ethos.

In these jurisdictions, efforts are being made to identify the strengths and weaknesses of Catholic schools with the intention of supporting good practice and addressing areas of concern. In Ireland, no such measures exist, and, therefore, no empirical evidence is available to ascertain faithfulness to the Catholic mission. The challenge in Ireland will be to devise an instrument that is relevant within a complex dynamic that operates between the Catholic Church and the State at primary and second-level Catholic schools. The Catholic Church is the owner of the schools, but the State, as paymaster, holds the reins. The Church has little say in the operational management of the schools, and its hold on safeguarding characteristic spirit is slipping fast ([Griffin 2019](#)). Taking ownership of how members of Boards of Management and Principals are prepared for their role as guardians and promoters of faith and ethos in the school would be a start. Empirical evidence of where is school is at in this regard is paramount to addressing issues of mission drift or mission abandonment.

## 10. Conclusions

The cohort of Diocesan Advisors who participated in the study confirm a changed landscape for their role in Catholic second-level schools. Their interpretations of their reality are presented in this study. They experience a lack of a clear identity, a further lack of clarity regarding their remit and a lack of support in delivering this service at a professionalised level. These changes have given rise to identity confusion and role ambiguity in this secularised setting. There is a lack of investment in professionalising the role across the decades since Vatican II has left it unfit for purpose in a climate where other aspects of school life have been professionalised. The lack of a system of accountability of all Catholic stakeholders for what are acceptable standards in Catholic schools needs addressing. Empirical evidence around the lived reality in Catholic schools in Ireland is required. Instruments could then be designed for Catholic schools in Ireland to evaluate their standards based on the findings.

Catholic schools must bear witness that is visible and vibrant. For this to happen, all stakeholders in Catholic schools need to share responsibility for the revitalisation of their school's Catholic identity. Following from this, a robust mechanism for maintaining and enhancing this identity could be devised. The Diocesan Advisor's role would then have a defined purpose, which would be enacted professionally while maintaining a vocational spirit.

## 11. GRACE Initiative

A thorough scoping of the landscape is required to ascertain the identity of Catholic schools at primary and secondary levels in the Republic of Ireland. Empirical evidence is needed to establish a direction for Catholic schools against a secular backdrop. To this extent, a timely initiative has been launched by Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, to fund research in this area. The initiative is linked with Global Researchers Advancing Catholic Education (G.R.A.C.E.) This is an international research-based partnership between Mary Immaculate College, Limerick; Boston College, United States; the University of Notre Dame Fremantle, Australia; and St Mary's University in Twickenham, London. GRACE also works in partnership with OIEC (International Office of Catholic Education). It provides opportunities for scholars of Catholic education and theology to affirm, study, collaborate, and respond meaningfully to challenges in the field of Catholic education. Two post-

doctoral researchers will embark on this journey to gather the evidence needed to ensure that Catholic schools will flourish into the future.

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