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Exploring how respect is articulated in Irish education policy, curriculum, circulars and legislation

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ABSTRACT

Respect as a term or value is often evoked to highlight a sense of esteem or right that an individual or group should require or be afforded. It is frequently viewed as relational, and central to the way people ought to relate to each other. However, the use of the term respect within classrooms, schools and policy can sometimes become so ubiquitous to the extent that it can become meaningless. Set against this context, this research analyses education documents relating to early childhood, primary and post-primary to consider the espoused positioning of respect within the Irish context. Sources were searched systematically using specific inclusion criteria, which resulted in 620 documents included in the sample, legislation ($n=40$), policies ($n=50$), active circulars ($n=179$), archived circulars ($n=249$) and curriculum specifications ($n=102$). Following the application of thematic analysis, the authors suggest that 'respect' tends to be understood in six main ways: Respecting difference and diversity; mutual respect/ respect as relational; respecting the child; respecting the environment; respecting parents' rights, views and values; and respecting the 'ethos' of the school. Some ways of understanding these conceptualisations and potential implications for schooling are discussed.

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Introduction

Respect is a term often invoked to highlight a sense of esteem or right that an individual or group should require or be afforded (Dillon 2007). While a focus on respect within legislation and related education or policy documentation can suggest an 'authoritative allocation of values' (Rizvi and Lingard 2010, 7), the use of the term respect within classrooms, schools and policy can become so ubiquitous to the extent that it can become meaningless (Rewakowski 2018). To explore the discourses of respect that impact on schooling and classrooms, this research analyses relevant education documents to consider the espoused positionings of respect within the Irish context. The aim of this

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paper is to consider how respect is conceptualised and articulated within Irish legislation, policies, circulars and curriculum, as well as any potential implications for schools. Understandings of respect and respect in education are firstly explored, in advance of consideration of some relevant Irish context, and presentation of the methodology and findings.

Respect (in education)

The place of respect in education and schooling can only be really considered when the various conceptualisations of respect are discussed to highlight their main and many facets. When we speak of the various objects of respect, most philosophers have broadly acknowledged that there are differing types of respect, and analysing respect involves considering these different types of respect (Dillon 2007). Respect, according to Dillon (2007, 203), is 'a form of regard: a mode of attention to and perception and acknowledgement of an object as having a certain importance, worth, authority, status, or power'. Its Latin etymology, 'respicere' (to look back again) seems to indicate that to respect something is to give some particular attention to it (Dillon 2007). Philosophers tend to discuss 'respect' from three perspectives – from a conceptual perspective (what is respect?) – from a normative perspective (why is respect important?) and from a perspective of application (what does respect look like?) (Dillon 2007). Respect can be perceived as a behaviour, an attitude, or a feeling (Dillon 2007). Bird (2004) suggests that respect is an attitude encompassing feelings, intentions, or dispositions with regard to the object in question. Ramarajan and Barsade (2006, 4) consider the esteem for others as grounded in a reciprocal process and comment on respect as 'the approval and recognition of the self by others'. The respect we may feel that is due to others may be guided by the respect that we feel may be due to ourselves, and as such respect, as understood by the authors, considers these issues as simply 'we treat others as we would like to be treated'.

From a moral perspective, Kant (1991, 1797) discusses the specific moral duties of respect for others, as well as self-respect. The application of respect, as informed by Kant, suggests that the individual has a moral duty to respect oneself and others. Self-respect, according to Kant (1991, 1797) is an important moral duty, and a prerequisite condition for an individual to respect others. From this perspective, a person respecting another person would acknowledge their inherent dignity as well as their right to be respected. Dillon (2007, 206) asserts that:

in modern philosophical discussions, human persons are regarded as paradigm objects of moral respect; if anything has moral standing or dignity and so warrants respect, it is the individual human being. Although there is a lively debate about whether nature (or all living beings, species, ecosystems) or societies (cultures, traditions) ought morally to be respected, most philosophical discussions of respect focus on respect for persons.

In addition, Darwall (1977; 2006; 2010) considers two types of respect: appraisal and recognition respect. 'Appraisal respect' is considered as an appraisal of a person's abilities or esteem for their achievements. For example, a person may respect a teacher they hold in high esteem for their teaching ability. 'Recognition respect', however, is thought of as respect that is paid to a person by nature of their humanity, or for a role they might inhabit. For example, a person might respect a different teacher for the authority their position has, but this would be due to any teacher, irrespective of their individual

ability. The work of Darwall (2006; 2010) and Kant (1797), highlight how respect between human beings could be viewed as a right, based on the dignity of a person or for the roles they might inhabit, but also as an appraisal of a person due their achievements or abilities.

Respect is often viewed as relational, in that it is central to the way in which people relate to one another (O'Grady, Hinchion, and McNamara 2011) and as something that can exist between people (Kant 1855). The ways in which people interact are key here as 'when communication becomes interpersonal, individuals treat each one another with greater respect and trust develops' (Frymier and Houser 2000, 217).

A traditional perspective of respect in education pertains to the respect that a teacher should expect from their pupils, however, arguably of more significance is the respect that is earned by a teacher by virtue of their pedagogical competence. This earned respect can be a function of the knowledge of the teacher but also their capacity to meaningfully cultivate interpersonal relationships (Tirri and Puolimatka 2000). Effective interpersonal relationships between teachers and pupils promote 'an atmosphere where teachers and pupils can communicate better within an atmosphere of greater trust and respect' (O'Grady, Hinchion, and McNamara 2011, 6). Within interpersonal relationships, respect can comprise some subjectivity in its practice, as it may be interpreted differently by different individuals. Therefore, it can be difficult to know what actions may be interpreted as respectful by these individuals, and so one must evaluate one's actions from the perspective of the other to judge if they are truly perceived as respectful (Darwall 2006). These are often grounded in the norms of accepted behaviour between individuals (Beach et al. 2007).

Whilst these conceptual and philosophical understandings of respect convey much about its significance and its focus, the specific practice of respect relates to the area under consideration, which for this article concentrates on its place within Irish education documentation.

Some relevant Irish context

Given this paper analyses Irish education documentation, the results and discussion pay significant attention to aspects of the Irish context. However, some context setting is required, in advance of considering the findings, for those less familiar with the Irish situation. These include the plurality of provision of school types in Ireland; the concept of 'characteristic spirit' and 'patron'; the role of the Catholic Church in Irish education and the changing demographic of Irish society.

The Irish Constitution (Government of Ireland 1937) established parents as the primary and natural educators of their child, ensuring parents do not have to send their child to a school that does not align with their values, hence introducing parental choice (in theory at least) as a core dimension of the Irish education system (McCormack, O'Flaherty, and Liddy 2020). Parents can choose from a variety of school types, particularly at the second level, including voluntary secondary schools (mainly under religious management), publicly managed Education and Training Board schools and Community and Comprehensive schools (Clavel and Flannery 2023; Colton 2009; Coolahan 2000; DoE 2022; IHREC 2011). Each school type has its own unique traditions, history and beginnings, often differing in terms of management structure and student

composition (Hannan and Boyle 1987; Smyth 2008; please see McCormack, O’Flaherty, and Liddy 2020 for some further detail).

Although Irish schools are fully state-funded, they are managed by entities known as ‘patrons’, as established in the Education Act (DES 1998). The Education Act (DES 1998) created a legal governance entity for schools, where the guardian of the ‘characteristic spirit’ of a school is a person or entity known as the ‘patron’. The primary responsibility of the patron is to safeguard the ‘characteristic spirit’ of the school and the patron has legal authority to appoint/dismiss the board of management, which is ‘responsible for the management of the school on behalf of the patron’ (DES 1998, S.15(1)). The board of management is required to ‘uphold and be accountable to the patron for ... upholding the characteristic spirit of the school’ (DES 1998, S.15(2)(b)). Section 15.2 of the Act provides a definition of characteristic spirit as being:

... determined by the cultural, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which informs and are characteristic of the objectives and conduct of the school ...

The Catholic Church and Catholic values have played an influential role in Irish society and schooling, both in terms of the provision of schools (through the management of primary and voluntary secondary schools) and through Catholic practices and values in the life of all schools (McCormack et al. 2019; 2023). This influence had a lasting impact on the values and values of education in Irish schools (McCormack, O’Flaherty, and Conboy 2023; Williams 1999). The dominance of Catholic values and practices has been called into question however, with a more diverse ethnic, cultural and religious Irish population being clearly evident in recent Central Statistics Office data (CSO 2017).¹ This data highlights the ongoing secularisation and diverse nature of Irish society (CSO 2017), resulting in Irish schools to be increasingly considered ‘linguistically and culturally complex social institutions’ (Lyons and Little 2009, 5). It is worth noting the increasing number of multi-denominational schools in Ireland (DoE 2022).

The methodological design governing this study is now outlined in advance of the findings.

Methodology

All legislation, circulars, policies and curricula relating to early childhood, primary and post-primary education, since the publication of the Irish Constitution (Government of Ireland 1937) until 2020 were searched systematically for reference to ‘respect’, as a value or term. Systematic reviews are a methodical, reliable and focused approach to identifying and analysing documents on a specific subject (Davies et al. 2012; Edwards et al. 2002). A systematic approach adopts a formal and structured method, using search terms and timelines to frame the search (Kitchenham 2004).

The aim of this qualitative systematic review is to identify understandings of respect within Irish education documents. Six Hundred and twenty documents were included in the sample (spanning the years 1937–2020). This includes active circulars ($n = 179$), archived circulars ($n = 249$), policies ($n = 50$), legislation ($n = 40$) and curriculum specifications ($n = 102$), as outlined in Table 1. The documents were searched via the website www.education.ie, while curriculum specifications were identified on www.curriculumonline.ie.

Table 1. Number and type of legislative, circular, policy and curricula documents analysed.

Focus	Number reviewed
Active circulars	179
Archived circulars	249
Policies	50
Legislation	40
Specifications/curriculum	102
Total	620

All education documentation relating to early childhood, primary or post-primary schooling was included (1937–2020). All current curriculum specifications relating to early childhood, primary and post-primary level, as available on www.curriculumonline, were included in the corpus. Due to the nature of the study and the strong link between respect and equality (Lintner 2011), Equality Legislation was also included, as was the Constitution of Ireland (1937).

Each document included was searched for the key term ‘respect’. All relevant data relating to the search term were collated and once all documents were searched, the authors firstly counted the number of documents that returned evidence for the search term. Once these were collated, the authors analysed, via thematic analysis, the dominant understandings, and interpretations of ‘respect’ in the documents. Utilising Braun and Clarke’s (2021) stages of thematic analysis, all references to ‘respect’ within the documents were coded and themed in terms of key understandings of respect. The overarching research question guiding the analysis was: *How is respect articulated in Irish legislation, policies, circulars, and curriculum documentation?*

It is important to note the following:

1. The documents were searched using the search term ‘respect’. The meaning of the term as espoused in each document was considered prior to inclusion in the data set as often the word respect was used in terms of ‘in respect of x’ rather than relating to the concept of ‘respect’ as a value.
2. We did not track the number of times respect was mentioned in a document. We were interested in the fact that (1) respect was mentioned in the document and (2) the nature of that mention.
3. Due to the large sample size the only search term used to analyse the documents was ‘respect’. Relevant discussions that did not use the specific search term may have been missed.
4. Given the scale of the analysis, human error, despite best efforts, may have occurred during aspects of the analysis. Repeating the analysis and cross checking supported in this regard.

The subjectivity of interpretation that researchers may bring to the analysis of a qualitative systematic review has been well documented (Jensen and Allen 1996). Such reviews have been described as a ‘meta-synthesis’ which often accentuate the level of subjectivity evident in qualitative analysis as ‘undertaking meta-synthesis means that no two reviewers will produce exactly the same results’ (Evans and Pearson 2001, 115). In line with the work of Braun and Clarke (2021), we acknowledge the subjective nature of

such research and present our interpretation of the data – another team of researchers may reach a different set of findings.

Findings

Eighty-four of the 620 documents analysed (14%) made some reference to the term respect. As outlined in Table 2, respect was most evident in the curriculum specifications ($n = 49$; 49%) and less evident in circulars (active = 4%; archived = 4%).

Across the documents, we identified six main understandings of respect. While inter-related, each is presented and explored individually to support clarity, with connections and related tensions between the different understandings being considered in the discussion. The following findings section aims to answer the main guiding research question outlined earlier: *How is respect articulated in legislative, policy, circular and curriculum documentation?*

Respecting difference and diversity

Across the analysed documents, we argue that respect is commonly presented in terms of supporting and promoting respect for difference and diversity ($n = 43^2$). Throughout the documents, such an understanding frequently related to respect for social, economic, cultural, ethnic and religious diversity. The main supportive legislation, the Education Act (DES 1998) and the Student Support Act (DES 2011), both stress the importance of respecting a diverse range of views and beliefs. The Education Act (DES 1998), identified that the ‘principles and requirements of a democratic society’, aims to ‘respect and promote respect for the diversity of values, beliefs, traditions, languages and ways of life in society’ (Part IV, 15(e)). We see the concept of respect and democratic societies repeated in curricular and policy documents, for example, *Towards Learning: An overview of senior cycle education* (NCCA 2009b); *Charting Our Education Future White Paper on Education* (DES 1995).

Fourteen of the 16 policy documents that make some reference to respect stressed the importance of respecting diversity and difference. One of the main policy documents focusing on respect is the *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector Report* from the Forum’s Advisory Group (Coolahan, Hussey, and Kilfeather 2012). This report references the previously cited Education Act (DES 1998) and focuses on such issues as celebrations in the school, prayer and school assemblies, as well as teaching about religion and curricula:

Students should learn about religions and beliefs in an environment respectful of human rights, fundamental freedoms and civic values. ... Preparation of curricula, textbooks and

Table 2. The number of documents that reference respect.

Focus	References to respect
Active circulars ($n = 179$)	7 (4%)
Archived circulars ($n = 249$)	9 (4%)
Policies ($n = 50$)	16 (33%)
Legislation ($n = 40$)	3 (8%)
Curriculum specifications ($n = 102$)	51 (50%)
Total (620)	85 (14%)

educational materials for teaching about religions and beliefs should take into account religious and nonreligious views in a way that is inclusive, fair, and respectful. (Coolahan, Hussey, and Kilfeather 2012, 151)

The *Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy* (DES undated, 10) stresses the importance of establishing an environment where ‘difference is acknowledged, respected, and welcomed’. Similarly, the *Criteria for the Establishment of New Primary Schools* (DES 2011, 65) views it as fundamental that diversity and pluralism in schooling is maintained and supported by a ‘continued respect for diversity of provision’. The *Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools (DEIS) Plan 2017* (DES 2017) also mentions the importance of learners developing a respect for diversity.

At the level of curricula, all foundation documents, *Aistear*³ (2009a), *Curaclam na Bunscoile* (DES 1999a), the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (DES 2015) and *Towards Learning: An Overview of Senior Cycle* (NCCA 2009b) place some emphasis on respect for diversity and difference as part of students learning experience. In fact, 38 of the 51 curriculum documents that mentioned ‘respect’ did so in this context. This is particularly evident in primary and junior cycle levels (n = 33), with the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (DES 2015) emphasising respect for diversity and difference through related statements of learning and key skills. Through curricular experiences, students are encouraged to develop capacity to respect differing perspectives, values and beliefs. The importance of this within democratic societies and for civic responsibility and citizenship are noted.

At early childhood, children are supported to ‘be aware of and respect others’ needs, rights, feelings, culture, language, background, and religious beliefs’ (NCCA 2020, 26). While at the primary level, for example, it is acknowledged that:

The curriculum has a particular responsibility in promoting tolerance and *respect for diversity* in both the school and the community; to enable children to *develop a respect for cultural difference*, an appreciation of civic responsibility, and an understanding of the social dimension of life, past and present; to enable children to develop personally and socially and to relate to others with understanding and respect ... develop a knowledge and understanding of his or her own religious traditions and beliefs, *with respect for the religious traditions and beliefs of others*. (DES 1999a, 28, emphasis added)

These foundation documents were frequently referenced at specifications/subject level. At specification/subject level, this focus is strongly supported by the *Social, Environmental and Scientific Education* (SESE) (DES 1999c) and *Social, Personal and Health Education* (SPHE) curricula at primary level (DES 1999b).

A number of Learning Outcomes in the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (DES 2015) focus on respect, particularly around respecting different perspectives and belief systems. For example, through engaging in junior cycle, students ‘discuss different beliefs and practices in an informed way, and respect those holding beliefs different from my own’ (DES 2015, 12). A dimension of the Key Skills at junior cycle, ‘Working with Others’ focuses on ‘respecting difference’ (DES 2015, 13). Respect is evident in such junior cycle specifications as Applied Technology; Civil, Social and Political Education (CSPE); Business Studies; Philosophy; Religion and Visual Arts.

Finally, at senior cycle students ‘learn to acknowledge and reflect the values of a democratic society, respecting the diverse beliefs and ways of life of others’ (NCCA 2009b, 14).

This is supported, for example, through the provision of Religious Education (RE) at senior cycle.

Mutual respect/ respect as relational

Respect is discussed from the perspective of mutual respect, with documents noting the importance and place of mutual respect within the education system, and also supporting students to develop respect for themselves and others through their schooling experience ($n = 36$). Mutual respect is often considered a core dimension of healthy human relationships and is particularly evident within curriculum documents ($n = 30$).

Circulars relating to behaviour in schools stress the importance of mutual respect. When respect is mentioned within active circulars it is mainly related to mutual respect ($n = 4$). For example, both circular M18/99: *Guidelines on Violence in Schools* and circular M33/91: *Guidelines Towards a Positive Policy for School Behaviour and Discipline* identify a positive school culture as one ‘where mutual respect, co-operation and natural justice are accepted features of the school community by all’.

A number of curricula documents ($n = 28$) specifically mention mutual respect. For example, History, as an aspect of SESE at the primary level, acknowledges that a ‘sense of empathy is essential if the child is to become critically aware of his/her own attitudes and those of others, and it makes a valuable contribution to the development of mutual respect and tolerance’ (DES 1999a, 9). Similarly, within SPHE, primary school students ‘learn how to develop and sustain relationships based on mutual respect’ (DES 1999b, 3). At junior cycle, mutual respect is developed within Physical Education (PE) and Music, for example. At senior cycle, emphasis is placed on supporting students to show ‘respect for others’ and to form and sustain ‘caring relationships’ (NCCA 2009b, 12). While Art, PE and Social Education (Leaving Certificate Applied) at senior cycle place some emphasis on mutual respect. Mutual respect is also developed within RE in the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programmes. The relational nature of respect is strongly evident in Aistear (2020), with adults being encouraged to build ‘fair and respectful relationships with children’ (NCCA 2020, 39).

Respecting the child

Specific focus is placed on respecting the child, respecting their beliefs, values and interests throughout their educational journey ($n = 16$). This is particularly true at curricula ($n = 11$) and policy ($n = 5$) level. While the *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector Report* from the Forum’s Advisory Group (Coolahan, Hussey, and Kilfeather 2012, 20) focus on respecting the ethos of the school, the report highlights that ‘it is equally important that the beliefs and sensibilities of every child are respected’, acknowledging that students experience school life/ethos where ‘their rights and dignity are respected and celebrated in the everyday life of the school’ (Coolahan, Hussey, and Kilfeather 2012, 76). Respecting the child is considered a dimension of their wellbeing. The child is positioned as the central facet of the *Wellbeing Policy* (NCCA 2017), which requires respecting and valuing their voice. Within such a context, approaches to discipline are positive, revolving around care, respect and consistency.

At curriculum level, Aistear (NCCA 2009a) places a strong emphasis on supporting the child to develop self-respect. Aim 1, under the theme Identity and Belonging, for example, is that ‘children will have strong self-identities and will feel respected and affirmed as unique individuals with their own life stories’ (NCCA 2020, 26). *Curaclam na Bunscoile Réamhrá* (DES 1999a, 6) recognises the uniqueness of and respects the integrity of each child. At senior cycle, a school culture that respects students is viewed as fundamental to learning, with senior cycle being underpinned by such values as ‘human dignity and respect, equality and inclusion, justice and fairness, freedom and democracy’ (NCCA 2009b, 11). Such statements are then repeated across certain senior cycle subject syllabi.

Respecting the environment

A small number of documents ($n = 10$) place a focus on students developing respect for the environment through their school experience. Certain policies ($n = 2$) and curricula ($n = 7$) place an emphasis on respecting the environment, for example, *The National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland, 2014-2020* (DES 2014). Within curricula, Aistear (NCCA 2009a; 2020) encourages children to develop a respect for their environment. SPHE at primary level explores respecting ‘the environment and develop[ing] a sense of responsibility for its long-term care’ (DES 1999b, 10). In senior cycle, Active Leisure Studies (LCA) supports students to ‘develop a concern for and respect of the natural and built environment leading to a willingness to be involved in its care and protection’ (DES undated, 47) while Politics and Society in LCE encourages students to develop ‘an understanding of and a respect for sustainable development’ (DES undated, 8).

Respecting parents’ rights, views and values

Respecting the rights, views and values of parents was identified by the researchers as a key understanding of respect within the analysed documents ($n = 10$). Two of the three legislative documents that referenced respect did so in this context. Within the *Constitution of Ireland* (Government of Ireland 1937) parents and the family are positioned as ‘the primary and natural educator of the child’ with the State guaranteeing to ‘respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children’ (Article 42, Section 1). The rights of parents to send their child to a school of their choice that best reflects their values and the states duty to respect this right, is supported by the Education Act (DES 1998).

While seven policy documents reference respect in this way, two pay particular attention to respecting the views, rights and values of parents. These include the *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector Report* from the Forum’s Advisory Group (Coolahan, Hussey, and Kilfeather 2012) and the *Criteria for Establishing New Primary Schools* (DES 2011), as outlined below:

No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, *the State shall respect the right of parents to*

ensure such education and teaching is in conformity with their own religions and philosophical convictions. (Coolahan, Hussey, and Kilfeather 2012, 145, emphasis added)

The criteria for the recognition of new schools *must respect the continuing desire of parents for denominational education ... where new patronage models are considered appropriate these must respect the rights of Catholic parents.* Faith communities in Ireland have made it clear that a common or 'neutral' religious education syllabus is totally unacceptable. (Revised Criteria and Procedures for the Establishment of New Primary Schools – Report of the Commission on School Accommodation, DES 2011, 67, emphasis added)

Interestingly, such an understanding of respect was not present in any analysed curriculum documentation.

Respecting the characteristic spirit of the school

Within schooling in Ireland, an important aspect of respect relates to issues of governance and from an ethical perspective, the 'patron' of schools has a legal obligation to enact and respect the schools 'characteristic spirit' or ethos. As established in the context section, the Education Act (DES 1998, Section 15.2) defines 'characteristic spirit' as being:

... determined by the cultural, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which informs and are characteristic of the objectives and conduct of the school ...

Certain policies ($n = 2$) and archived circulars ($n = 5$) reference respect in relation to respecting the characteristic spirit (or ethos) of the school. Circulars (for example 0037/2013; 0041/2015; 0035/2016; 0042/2017; 0034/2018; 0045/2013) stress the importance of teachers/special needs assistants respecting the ethos of the school. The *Revised Criteria and Procedures for the Establishment of New Primary Schools – Report of the Commission on School Accommodation* (DES 2011, 46), for example, views 'ethos' as central to a school and indicates that 'the campus situation must respect the right of a school and patron to protect that ethos/spirit. It is important that each school understands and respects the ethos of neighbouring schools'. While the *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector Report* from the Forum's Advisory Group (Coolahan, Hussey, and Kilfeather 2012) suggests that students experience this ethos through how they experience their own individual rights and dignity. The Forum suggests a difference between respecting a school's ethos, versus actively supporting this ethos. The two excerpts below illustrate these points:

Regulations might provide that a requirement could be included in enrolment policies that pupils who enrol in a school *should respect the ethos of the school* as distinct from any requirement for pupils or their parents to actively support the ethos of the school. (Coolahan, Hussey, and Kilfeather 2012, 50, emphasis added)

The reality for children is that the ethos they experience is whether their rights and dignity *are respected and celebrated in the everyday life of the school.* It is about the day-to-day experience of the interaction of the members of the central school community, children, teachers and other school staff, parents, and visitors. (Coolahan, Hussey, and Kilfeather 2012, 76, emphasis added)

Again, such an understanding of respect was not present in any analysed curriculum documentation.

Discussion

As reflected in the findings, the authors argue that ‘respect’ tends to be positioned in six main ways across the analysed documents: Respecting difference and diversity; mutual respect/ respect as relational; respecting the child; respecting the environment; respecting parents’ rights, views and values; and respecting the ethos or characteristic spirit of the school. At one level, it is positive that some education policies and related documentation are engaging with the concept of respect. The low reference and consideration of respect within the reviewed documents is concerning, however (14% of all documents reviewed). If respect is considered a core and foundational dimension of education and schooling, a greater focus on respect might be expected within these foundational documents, particularly legislatively. Similar research on understandings of care within Irish education legislation found that 12% of documents made references to care (O’Flaherty and McCormack 2023), which aligns with findings in the current study. The emphasis placed on respecting the child, developing self and mutual respect, and supporting students to develop positive and respectful relationships, particularly through their curricula experience, is a positive finding. Given the centrality of respect to one’s wellbeing, such a focus within the reviewed documents is also welcome (Anderson and Graham 2016) and reflects the greater emphasis placed on wellbeing in recent policy and curricula documentation (NCCA 2021).

It is interesting to note that the majority of references to respect were present within curriculum documents (60%), particularly recently revised curriculum (DES 2015). Frequently a focus on respect within a foundational curriculum document, such as the *Framework for Junior Cycle*, (DES 2015) was evident throughout related subjects/specifications. This points towards curriculum coherence in terms of embedding respect across curricular experiences (McCormack, O’Flaherty, and Conboy 2023; McLaughlin 1994) and, hopefully, ensuring respect is ‘lived out’ within school and classroom life (McLaughlin 1994). This may also indicate that the concept of respect is more central to current-day curriculum deliberations and reforms, with more recent curriculum (i.e. *Framework for Junior Cycle*) placing a greater focus on such concepts and related key skills (DES 2015). While this potentially bodes well for on-going and upcoming changes to senior cycle (NCCA 2022), the question of supporting schools and school personnel to enact such a broad spanning and complex representation of ‘respect’ remains.

It is important to acknowledge that reference to respect within education documentation, however rare, does not always infer compliance or simplicity (Darling-Hammond 1990). Bacchi and Goodwin (2016, 14) suggest policies produce ‘particular kinds of problems’, especially once attempts at enactment begin. Findings reported in this paper suggest some contradictory and opaque messages, with regards an expression of respect across policy, legalisation and curriculum. The differing understandings of respect the authors identified in the analysed documents reflects the multi-layered and complex nature of respect (O’Grady 2017), but also the multiple, and at times competing tasks governments and state agencies attempt to achieve through legislation and related documentation (Levin 2007). The different understandings of respect we generated from

the reviewed documents, and what it requires of schools, are not necessarily contradictory at an individual level. Very few, we would hope, would question an emphasis on respecting the child, mutual respect and respecting diversity (Darling-Hammond 1990; Pak Tee 2008). What concerns us, from this data set, is the different understandings of respect presented, and the subsequent requirements/demands of schools, and how these are or can be potentially managed at school level. Situations may arise, for example, where a school is expected to respect diverging things: where the values and perspectives of the child, their parents and the school ethos do not and cannot align (Audley and Svetlana 2020). Schools and school personnel may be placed, as they frequently are (Ball et al. 2012), in an impossible situation of respecting opposing values and belief systems and may be unclear how to proceed (Hoggett 2006; O'Flaherty et al. 2018). In such contexts, how can schools manage to enact respect in all the ways espoused within the analysed documents or make sense of these competing respect agendas? As Hoggett (2006, 179) argues, 'it is often at the level of 'operations' that unresolved value conflicts are more sharply enacted'. This can result in schools being the ones that have to 'make sense' of potential 'contradictory or incoherent' policies (Levin 2007, 10).

While schools and teachers are used to dealing with 'opaque and contradictory policy demands' (Ball 2021, 142), this can undermine efforts to genuinely attune and pay attention to the practice of respect within their organisations (Burgess and Lowe 2022). An opaqueness with regards policy focus and meaning, or between the rhetoric of policy and the reality of school life, while potentially intentional (Skerritt 2023), can impact school and teacher agency to effectively enact such a focus on respect. It is important to acknowledge that such documents do not arrive 'out of the blue' but rather reflect an interpretational and representational history (Ball 1993). Ball et al. (2012) and others (Ball 2021; Braun, Maguire, and Ball 2010; Skerritt 2023; Skerritt et al. 2023a; 2023b) suggest that any policy needs to go through a process of 'interpretation and translation' where policy is 'enacted' through 'interpretation'. This albeit necessary step may however lead to a variety of interpretations being enacted across different schools. Darling-Hammond contends that one reason for 'recurrent failure' of policies is that teachers' prior learning, beliefs and attitudes are rarely considered as an essential ingredient in the process of teaching itself, much less in the process of change (Darling-Hammond 1990, 344). Ultimately, how policies are perceived, interpreted and enacted will be determined, in some part, by the meaning and commitment of school staff, and their positions and relative power in the school hierarchy (Ball et al. 2012; Maguire, Braun, and Ball 2015; Skerritt et al. 2023b). Skerritt (2023, 501) suggests that to speak merely of a process of policy 'implementation' suggests a linear and rational approach that can be applied consistently by all involved, with little room for flexibility or agency, and 'such a conceptualisation of policy reduces people to reductive technicians'. Mindful of this, it is important to consider the teacher's/schools' level of knowledge, understanding, beliefs and values with regards reflecting respect in the school (Brown and Crippen 2016) and subsequently the facilitation of appropriate, evidence-informed professional development and learning opportunities. We cannot simply assume 'that schools can and will respond, and respond quickly, to multiple policy demands and other expectations' (Ball et al. 2012, 9). For example, teachers and schools may continue to

struggle to meaningfully engage with ‘respect for the child’, ‘respect for difference and diversity’ or ‘respecting the parents’ values’ and often avoid this area (Burgess and Lowe 2022). Issues such as lack of understanding, fear of doing the wrong thing and/or offending the child or parent/guardian, due to limited experience or education in the area, are reflected in the literature (Bishop and Durksen 2020; Burgess and Lowe 2022) and warrants further exploration within an Irish context (Conboy 2023). Equally, a question of who leads may emerge, as often times, middle leadership in schools may be charged with enactment of various policies (Skerritt 2023; Skerritt et al. 2023a; 2023b).

Coherence and clarity across the different education documentation is also important to ensure a shared understanding regarding what respect means within education contexts and how it can be achieved (Mavropoulou, Mann, and Carrington 2021; Thorburn 2020). Providing theoretical, conceptual but also practical advice on how schools can enact respect within school life may help alleviate any potential avoidance or tensions (Thorburn 2020). The *Education and Training Board Ireland Patrons Framework on Ethos* (ETBI 2022) may prove a useful example in this regard as it sets out standards and statements of effective practice for Education and Training Board schools, thus supporting understanding, self-evaluation, planning and development. In contrast, early childhood practitioners do not operate in the same education governance structures that guide schooling practices as the vast majority are privately owned (Moloney and Petersen 2016) so the enactment of the Aistear curriculum (NCCA 2009a) would be entirely different to a publicly managed body and therefore this distinctive context would merit a further but separate study.

As argued previously by Skerritt (2023), the opacity we found across the documents may be intentional, considering increasing tensions of cultural and religious diversity in Ireland (Faas, Darmody, and Sokolowska 2016). This opacity could hamstring schools so they cannot meaningfully progress these issues in schools. The most common way in which respect was referred to across the documentation was as an object of esteem, however there was very little explicit reference as to how it should be practiced. Respect then seems to manifest itself as a ‘useful tautology’ as it highlights issues that should be esteemed but merely repeat themselves by stating that they should be esteemed i.e. to respect diversity we need to make sure diversity is respected. Used in this context, the policies and documentation highlight the increasing anxiety and need within schools to address these issues (Ainscow 2020), but only referring to ‘respect’ so as to give an illusion of action.

Concluding comments

When policy, legislation and curriculum ‘tip the hat’ with the inclusion of respect in many ways, one could argue that this is mere tokenistic rhetoric without any real consideration of how this value can be realised in practice. This can also create difficulties for school personnel, who are the ones left responding to emerging and contradictory issues. Thus, there is a requirement for refinement of the conceptualisation of action and response both within and between system levels – that is an articulation of intent and process. Supporting schools’ and teachers’ conceptual understanding of respect, and what it means for practice is important. However, without clarity and coherence

at a macro policy, legislative and curricula level regarding the form and nature of respect and what it means for school/classroom life – the potential for tensions and contradictions in living out such values within school life remains.

Notes

1. CSO 2023 reports on Diversity, Migration, Ethnicity, Irish Travellers and Religion is due for publication in late October 2023.
2. Respecting diversity and difference was referenced in 43 of the 84 documents that made reference to respect in some way.
3. Aistear is the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

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