Chapter 1 has pointed to the neglect of children’s agency when it comes to analysing the issue of religious identity. In this chapter, we draw on case studies conducted in five Irish primary schools in 2010–2011 to contribute to the understanding of children’s perspectives on their own religious formation. Ireland is an interesting case study in this regard since the dominance of faith schools, especially Catholic schools, serves to constrain school choice on the part of families of minority or secular beliefs, an issue that is discussed in the second section. Within faith schools, children are required to attend a form of religious education, which emphasizes faith formation, unless their parents ‘opt out’ of these classes on their child’s behalf. This practice may further serve to limit children’s freedom to exercise their own choices regarding participation in religious activities. In spite of these constraints, analyses presented in the chapter highlight the way in which children negotiate their own religious meanings, developing a personalized set of beliefs, in the context of, but not determined by, home and school.

The fourth section of this chapter looks at parent–child communication regarding religion and beliefs, and at parental perspectives on the degree to which children should be able to make their own decisions in this domain. The fifth section examines children’s perspectives on religious education within the school setting while the sixth section explores children’s own religious beliefs. Before presenting these empirical findings, the following sections briefly describe the Irish context and the approach taken in the study of Irish primary schools.
Religion and primary schooling in Ireland

Historically, the majority of the Irish population has been Roman Catholic, with a minority Protestant group and a small Jewish community. Over the period from the foundation of the State (1922) to the early 1990s, Catholics made up 92–95 per cent of the total population (CSO, 2012). However, the period since 1991 has seen a slight increase in the relative size of the proportion reporting membership of Protestant and other religions as well as those reporting no religion. As a result, Catholics now make up 84 per cent of the population (CSO, 2012). The growth in the representation of minority (non-Catholic) religious groups in recent years must be seen in the context of recent rapid immigration into Ireland during the period of economic boom.

Religious affiliation as declared in official statistics (such as the Census) cannot necessarily be interpreted in a straightforward fashion. It is not entirely clear whether the designation reflects the religion/belief system in which a person was raised, their current beliefs and/or their current practices. Even though the Irish population may appear relatively homogenous, survey data indicate significant variation in religiosity and practices among the Catholic population. European Social Survey data indicate that 63 per cent of Catholic adults attend mass on (at least) a weekly basis, compared to 90 per cent in the 1970s (O’Mahony, 2008). Mass attendance varies by age (being lowest for the 25–34 age group), location (being lowest in urban areas, at 20 per cent) and by educational level (being lowest for tertiary graduates). Relying on self-declared religious affiliation alone may therefore obscure some of the complexities involved in exploring beliefs and practices among the population.

The Catholic Church and Church of Ireland have been centrally involved in the establishment and management of large numbers of primary and secondary schools since the early 19th century, with schools assuming a pivotal role in religious socialization in the Irish context (Inglis, 1987). The current profile of primary schools reflects this historic legacy; Catholic schools now make up 91 per cent of all primary schools while the Church of Ireland is the largest single provider of minority faith schools (5.7 per cent of primary schools). In response to the dominance of religious-run schools, a non-governmental organization, Educate Together, set up the first multi-denominational school in 1978; their schools represent the fastest growing sector in recent years, although they make up only 2.3 per cent of all primary schools. In 2008, the Minister for Education and Skills sanctioned the first of a new type of school, known as the community national school, with this