

## **Abstract**

*This work involves researching normative family discourses which are mediated through post-primary settings. The traditional family, consisting of father, mother and children all living together in one house (nuclear) is no longer reflective of the home situation of many Irish students (Lunn and Fahey, 2012). My study problematizes micro practices involving families as reported by students in three post-primary schools, to report how family differences are managed and (mis)recognised from their lens. The influence of the dominant educational discourses (contextual and textual), are also considered. A framework using Foucauldian post structural critical analysis traces family profiling through normalising discourses such as notes home which presume two parents together. Teacher assumptions about heterosexual two-parent families make it difficult for students to be open about a family set-up that is constructed as `different` to the rest of the schools.*

*My findings will be of interest to educational research and policy makers because they highlight how changing demographics such as family compositions are mis-conceptualised in schools, leading to issues of injustice such as bullying and isolation for the students involved.*

*Key concepts: Family Diversity, Normalization, Pastoral Power, Family Discrimination, Foucault.*

## **A Foucauldian Perspective on Student Experiences of Family Discourses in Post-Primary Schools, by Dr. Ann-Marie Desmond**

### **Introduction**

Irish society has witnessed a major shift in family composition in the last number of decades, so much so that researchers agree that it is no longer acceptable to describe `the family` as a monolithic traditional entity (Bernardes 1997; Carrington 2002; Smart 2004; Giddens 2009).

Lunn and Fahey (2012) report that,

*“One-in-three families in Ireland depart from the traditional model of a married couple both of whom are in their first marriage. One-in-four children under 21 years of age live in a family that does not conform to this model” (2012:7-8).*

Lunn and Fahey also found that the rate of change toward diverse family models has been slower in Ireland than in other European countries. The Children and Family Relationships Bill (2014) recognises the need to legislate for family diversity, yet school personnel continue to relate to families as if nothing has changed, except for an awareness of the parent/guardian title. The dominant policies of each school explicate their respect for all types of student diversity but for whatever reason, family-type difference seems to be the most muted topic of all; with little or no references to single (never married parent/s), lone (widowed/ deserted) parented families, reconstituted families (blended/binuclear), same-sex families, adoptive families, and so on (Giddens, 2009). This article investigates how schools frame family type as well as considering students` experiences and perspectives on schools treatment of family type.

In the past, sociological and psychological research literature or `expert` discourses on the family (such as Piaget, 1952), have tended to define the concept of family through a narrow and structural lens. This research often equated biological children of married families with economic stability and good family practices. Researchers highlighted deficit or negative

findings on schooling outcomes for any family composition other than the traditional type. This perspective is evidenced in the following quotations: “*Marital disruption negatively affects how children are socialised and puts them under greater stress*” (Mc Lanahan and Sandefur, 1994), and “*Children (of separated/divorced parents) perform poorly in school*” (Hill, Augustyniak and Ponza, 1989). This perspective was also evident in Ireland in response to the campaign to legalise divorce which began from the 1960s onwards (Mc Quaid, 1965; *Irish Examiner* 09-02-04). Schools, though not directly involved, took an anti-divorce stance reflecting their responsible role of safe-guarding the traditional family, and their religious ethos (Inglis, 1998; Girvin, 2008).

Foucault (1926-1984) refers to these ‘truths’ as ‘*regimes of truth*’; “*Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth - that is the types of discourses which it accepts and makes function as true*” (Foucault 1977: 38; 2000: 131). Twentieth century literature on Ireland shows very little research relating to family life from that period, though a number of reports highlight the issues of repression and regulation in areas such as: Childhood (Maguire, 2009), Education (Magray, 1998), Family (Earner-Byrne, 2008) and Roman Catholic Church control (Arensberg and Kimball/Hannan, 1972). Some Irish-specific research such as Fahey, Keilthy and Polek (2012), and Hannan and Halpin (2014), among others, now challenge the discourse of marriage as automatically beneficial for child development, finding that the role of the mother’s education is a greater determinant of success than the type of family structure the child lives in. They concluded that,

*“Differences on the four indicators of child well-being between children of two-parent married families, cohabitating families, step-families and lone parent families were slight or completely absent. In general the educational and material resources of parents mattered more to children’s development than what type of marital or living arrangements they had with each other”* (Fahey, Keilthy and Polek, 2012: 82).

### ***Aim and Focus of this Paper***

My study focused on school discourses in relation to modern families, and the double-bind dilemmas which some families may find themselves in, due to a discrepancy between what the school expects, and what their family reality is. The aim of my research was to investigate whether a politics of family adjustment operates around non-traditional families in order to assimilate them into school structures. This paper reports on the voices of a sample of students from three school settings in order to demonstrate the multitude of pressures, problems, identities, desires and demands which impact on their everyday school-family discourse. The paper is structured around four sections. Section 1 presents Foucault's post-structural philosophy as a theoretical framework with which to analyse institutional discourses pertaining to family. Section 2 explains the methodology used. Section 3 presents the findings from interviews with post-primary students, and Section 4 discusses ways in which the educational discourses around diverse family forms can become more informed and inclusive.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

Foucault's (1977, 2000) post-structural analysis of disciplinary discourses is used throughout this analysis to rethink the positioning and classifications of non-traditional families in post-primary schools, through discourse analysis. Discourse throughout this article is to be understood as the words, utterances, actions and signs through which people and society make sense of their surroundings. Foucault suggests that the ways in which meanings are created and understood around certain topics, such as family in this instance, are not accidental but political, not natural but constructed; for example, the ways in which the State and Religious Congregations historically created a nexus of meaning relating to family living can be viewed

from this perspective. Foucault believes that all meaning in society is constituted in language, within a specific historical context, and never free of political intent. Every utterance, every letter is political; even the control of family through institutions has been, and continues to be political. This politics of knowledge forms a network of `truths` or cultural meanings through which power gains its legitimacy to govern people's lives, education, family and so on.

Foucault analysed a variety of historical and contemporary periods, specialising in eighteenth century society, with a particular focus on understanding how criminals and mentally ill people were controlled so that they did not impact on the general populace. Inmates were subjected to discipline as a means of rectifying their behaviours, through techniques such as *normalisation*. By such means the government, in the framework of the institution, was able to regulate behavior by setting up a system of differences. Individuals who were judged to be outside the norm were disciplined, through pastoral care, until they conformed to the standards of the institution “*to prevent contagions*” (1977: 172).

Foucault's insights can be compared with present forms of governance in post-primary schools and their need to standardise and normalise their student cohorts through a panoptic view (1977: 201). The watchtower of the prison is replaced by a paper trail to ensure that the student's profile is clearly documented. Foucault's conceptual tools enable me to question the taken-for-grantedness of the routines and rules of the school structures. This perspective challenges the assumptions inherent in the many aspects of school functioning such as the normalisation of the traditional type family; “*The individual is put in an environment that evaluates, corrects, and encourages responses according to a norm*” (Foucault/Ransom, 1997: 18). The normal is thus equated with the natural or right type of family.

All of these discourses have a context, are reinforced by texts and are made visible through the institutional practices, so I decided on a three-pronged approach (*Appendix 1*) to the inter-linking of: Family Discourse as Context; Family Discourse as Text; and Family Discourse as Practice, this being the key focus, from the perspective of students.

1). *Family Discourse as Context* involved interrogating the context of influence- exploring how the Irish State and society whose construct of `the good family` (equated with the traditional family) in state and `expert` (psychological) discourses, ensured that non-traditional families were differentiated in all aspects of cultural life, including school. The vested interest of Church and State within the Irish context was investigated so as to attempt to understand the complexities of their interconnectedness and their links to family governance at post-primary level. Since the present organisational processes around school and family, as institutions, are deeply intertwined with the past, and because words and concepts relating to the understanding of `family` are essentially dialogical, these dimensions of school life can only be fully understood within the specific time frame from which they originate.

By tracing the ways in which the State, in the form of the Department of Education and Skills [DES] and the Catholic Church understood `family`, and how such understandings impacted on their organisational aspects of the school/home assemblage, I traced links between historical and present realities so as to provide an understanding of why it continues to be difficult for Irish post-primary schools to develop a more liberal discourse around non-traditional family forms. In the past where tensions between the Church and State arose, with competing discourses as to the scope and degree of control of each party, there remained an explicit understanding that no other body had an influencing prerogative in such matters.

They therefore had to develop a mutual `friendship` to safeguard their vested interests. To cement that `friendship`; “*The church offered the state continuity and stability and in return sought its support for continuity and stability in its own work*” (Nic Giolla Phadraig, 1997: 609).

The second-level school sector is comprised of five distinct school types: Voluntary Secondary Schools, Vocational Schools, Community Colleges, Community Schools and Comprehensive Schools. All schools in this sector are governed by DES circulars, rules and regulations and education legislation. They follow a centralised curriculum and examination system. Approximately 90% of voluntary secondary schools are Roman Catholic, mostly owned and managed by male or female religious orders while a small minority of schools are managed by Protestant, Jewish or Independent bodies (Milne, 2003). The school trustees (generally the Bishops, Religious Orders or Trust Bodies) are the owners of the voluntary secondary schools as well as the employer of those who work in the school (Drudy and Lynch, 1993). All non-fee paying schools receive full state funding for incremental salaries and capitation grants, while fee-paying schools receive salaries but not capitation grants. Articles of Management for Catholic Secondary Schools (2003) and `The Deeds of Variation of schools under the patronage of the Roman Catholic Church` stipulate that the religious ethos of each founding order/school has to be respected (Hyland, 2006). This is reinforced by the Education (Amendment) Act (2012, 14:5v) which confirms “*The right of schools to manage their own affairs in accordance with this Act*”.

Today, Christian ethos is maintained by the Christian churches through their patronage of post-primary schools. The Joint Managerial Body [JMB] represents voluntary secondary schools which make up 52% of all post-primary schools. Official contextualised discourses

begin for families on enrolment night where they are asked to subject themselves to the authority of the institution for the good of their offspring, and for the good of the school. Pastoral Care (PC) discourses are explained to parent/s as a means of helping them to understanding how school structures work, as well as identifying `problem students` (or families) with specific learning or social/personal difficulties amidst the school`s academic setting. The PC discourses of each school are linked to the school`s ethos and climate of care which involve structures such as class-teacher (tutor), year head, and principal; all helping to initiate students into the disciplinary apparatus of the institution. Measures such as induction evenings, family profiling, notes home and in-school PC practices are just some examples of family constructs within the school institution. Parent/s are asked to sign up to ensure that their adolescent son/daughter complies with the school`s code of discipline and ethos. Enrolment and registration requires that the name used is the official name on the student`s birth certificate. Some enrolment forms still require a father`s name first and a mother`s maiden name second. The birth certificate is required as proof of the student`s legitimate name and becomes the official name by which the student is addressed throughout his/her school life. *“It was of the utmost importance for tutors to build up a profile of each student, taking into account `the positive as well as the limitations of the child`s background` (Collins, 1993:8/ Collins and Mc Niff, 1999:104).* Confidentiality is assured on issues which are considered private or personal.

2. *Family Discourse as Text* involved analyzing official texts in the form of school literature such as: enrolment forms, notes home and school policies as well as directives/circulars from the State and the Department of Education and Skills (DES). The Education Acts (1998/2012) are the key legislative documents which set the official tone for the normative regulation of all school activities, including the school-home relationship. These Acts allow for



inclusiveness through the guise of a liberal agenda (Section 15(e), Education Act, 1998). Local texts in the form of school policies are generated by each school with due regard for the requirements of the Act, as well as the context of the school. The state circulates dominant discourses in the form of texts but the ethos of the various schools (interlinking context and text), even if vague in reality, is highly influential in determining whether and how policies are implemented (Mc Garry, 2013). In voluntary secondary schools, policies are also subject to the agreement of a school's Board of Management before being implemented, in line with the governing body of voluntary secondary schools, the JMB. Section 15 of the Education Act legally permits schools to uphold the ethos of the school and is unequivocal in stating that Boards of Management may;

*“Uphold and be accountable to the patron for so upholding, the characteristic spirit of the school as determined by the cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which inform and are characteristic of the objectives and conduct of the school”* (Section 15(2), (b): 1998).

My research into family discourse and student experience involved an investigation into local school policies. The three schools I visited had a range of written policies (as stipulated by DES) on Pastoral Care, School Admission, Behavior, and Bullying, among others. Each policy began with a reference to the school context or mission statement. These school policies and discourses thus impact on the seemingly ad hoc practices of each post-primary school, while a Foucauldian perspective on these discourses suggest that they are prescriptive rather than accidental or natural.

3). *Family Discourse as Practice* include the actions, spoken words, enacted practices and thoughts or attitudes through which institutions make meaning around their context and texts relating to all aspects of school life. To understand these practices, I decided to explore, first-hand, student reflections on family practices in a number of post-primary schools. Their

accounts focus primarily on the discourses of practice, but references to texts and context form an integral part of their narrative. Young people in three schools (*Appendix 2*) were invited to give their perspectives on their school's discourses involving non-traditional family forms, initially through a survey and then followed up with interviews. In all, 319 surveys were completed by senior cycle students. The responses to the survey formed the basis for my interviews (see Methodology section). Topics such as silencing, issues of difference and identity were all mentioned in the survey responses.

After reading the survey responses I began to formulate and structure my research questions more clearly. Student survey responses suggested that post-primary schools were not meeting the challenges presented by non-traditional families. These observations pointed the way for the interview questions which I needed to ask, such as questions probing the assumptions about family formation in teacher talk and curricular materials; whether students from different family forms are deliberately made to feel excluded in the classroom, and if so, why. I began to question what particular discourse schools use to construct non-traditional families and whether all schools follow set classifications and practices. I was also interested in finding out how students take up their subject position of `different`, or `other`.

The last question on the survey sheet issued an invitation to students to be interviewed; fourteen students volunteered by signing their name on the survey sheet. The table in *Appendix 3* gives a description of these students, their family type, their school and the year-group to which they belonged. Eight students were from non-traditional family situations, and six students were from traditional family forms. The volunteers were each given a consent slip to be signed by themselves, and another form for one of their parent/s to sign. A week later I collected the signed forms from the schools and agreed with the principals to revert to

them in order to organise suitable days and times to interview the students. Some of the students, who had volunteered for interview by putting their signature at the end of their survey form, did not return their signed consent form, so they could not be interviewed. The principals in each school were willing to pursue them for me but I did not want to put pressure on anyone, so I elected to interview the interested cohort only. The reasoning for this is that some students may have changed their minds after I left their classroom or they may have reconsidered when they discussed it at home with their parent/s. This self-selected process meant that many of the students I needed to hear from did not volunteer for interview. If I had sampled students from non-traditional families only I would have been guilty of intensity sampling (Mertens, 2005: 318), which has been criticized as extreme-case strategy. I decided instead to accept the fourteen students who had volunteered, irrespective of their family formation.

### ***Methodology***

There are debates around what counts as truth or knowledge in quantitative research (Mertens, 2005), but the post-structuralist view of knowledge generation is not to find definitive answers or `truths`, since these theorists believe that such truths are contingent and are reflective of what has been, and continues to be, constructed by society. Therefore, my goal is not to offer truths involving families in schools, but to explore post-structurally the subjectivities offered to students within their school institution, so as to consider the implications for this study. Defining this research began with the problematisation of family constructs in post-primary schools and the need to meaningfully recognise all family type diversity. To address this dilemma I needed to attend critically to how discourses work across all aspects of school life so as to understand how the intertwining of the various discourses such as meanings in text, meanings in school policies and meanings around voices and effects

happened. I liken this critical post-structural analysis to a form of excavation, uncovering the layers of school governance so as to look at the workings of the rhizome of discourses at play in order to understand the contingency of family constructs. This process closely traced the emergent themes from the data as well as noting specific absences of discourses on family diversity across multiple sites. The data analysis involved tracing through these discourses for common themes and patterns (Le Greco and Tracy, 2009).

A structured-focus comparison was applied to the data to trace the patterns in each participant's view on the interactive family practices across textual discourses, contextual discourses, interpersonal and institutional discourses in their school. I plotted the frequency of references, directly and indirectly, to assumptions and silencing about families in their schools by each interviewee, and wrote down the quotation in which it appeared, in order to code them. I traced these recurring codes for silencing and suppression practices by selecting, separating and sorting each interview conversation so as to begin an analytical account of them. Post-structural discourse analysis was used as a means of making explicit the codes which were being used by the dominant discourses to suppress reference to family difference, for example; the use of terms such as mother/father in notes home, in teacher assumptions, or in curricular materials, all of which reinforce the normalization and taken-for-grantedness of the traditional type family in school discourse. A series of empirically unearthed patterns began to emerge (*Appendix 4*). By crystallizing these patterns (Ellingson, 2004) it becomes possible to show that schools construct non-traditional family forms in different ways and in different contexts, thereby questioning the apparently 'given' way schools tend to construct families. It reveals that normalisation and suppressive processes are not an individual deficit, as students are led to believe, but a large-scale institutional deficit which has to stigmatise and silence difference which is sensed as a threat to the regime.

### ***Key Thematic Findings***

The data gathered from students centre on their reactions to family discourse at two overlapping levels of their everyday school life:

a).The formal curricular constructs of family in texts, in school context, and in practices involving teachers and classmates.

b).The informal reactions of their school friends to perceived family differences.

Four main themes are outlined as follows:

- i) Traditional Family Assumptions in Curricular Materials and in Teacher Talk.
- ii) Silences around Family Talk in School.
- iii) Fears around Family Diversity in Class.
- iv) Friends` Understanding of Family Change.

These themes are now discussed in greater detail, drawing on a number of key quotations which exemplify the findings.

#### *i.) Traditional Family Assumptions in Curricular Materials and in Teacher Talk*

In the interviews with students, the ways in which curricular materials, such as those found in Religion, Home Economics, Language classes, and Social, Personal and Health Education (S.P.H.E.), construct family in particular ways, are enumerated. They critiqued their Social, Personal and Health Education book`s description of families (Potts, 2009) because of assumptions it made such as: young people have parents, they spend time with both parents, a family unit has to include children. As one student noted, *“There`s nothing about sole custody, there`s an assumption that children are biological, that they have to spend time with both parents, and there`s no mention of what the child wants”* (Gerard). Students commented that the nuclear family form was always portrayed as happy. One student said *“They are all fairy tale style”* (Fox). Religion was mentioned most often as the subject that touches on

sensitive issues. Another student Jack, remarked, “*Religion in general is extremely offensive to divorced, co-habiting and same-sex families*”. Academic subjects, while attempting to be more aware of difference through their use of references to parent/guardian, still reveal implied assumptions of the normative family; for example, diagrams of family trees in Maoin 3 (Mentor), and Fonn 3 (Ed. Co.).

Interviewer: *What topics or subjects present difficulties for students from non-traditional family forms?*

Alva: *There is no right or wrong family, but wrong is implied in Home Economics. There`s the family with Daddy and Mammy and kids, and then there`s the other families; the divorced, the separated and the Mum and Mum family. Thanks, we`re different. No! We`re all different, as if there was something wrong with my family!*

Lack of teacher understanding was also mentioned, as well as teacher blunders and awkwardness around the topic of family diversity. Some students mentioned the taken-for-granted comments by teachers which revealed their assumptions about traditional type families:

Lisa: *If it`s mentioned in English class, and the student has to say mother, instead of parents. Letters home should have parent/guardian on them.*

Sally: *Talking about families in class, the penny doesn`t always drop; in French class the teacher corrected a girl who wrote about her two mummies, and teacher said, mammy and daddy, and Fifi said, no, I`ve two mummies.*

Students report that pervasive silences dominate their classrooms at the times they are asked to describe their family in Irish, French or German class because they are not accustomed to articulating their emotive worlds in the regular everyday classroom. Reference to family, including family composition, is considered `normal` for language class, but not natural.

Although it is presented as a self-protective posture, the students experienced being silenced as an external imposition. Students were even more keenly aware of the manner in which that silencing happened in the classroom.

The manner in which teachers respond differently to situations involving students from non-traditional families was noted by the interviewees. Fear of being treated differently by the teacher if s/he knew of a student's `difference` was of real concern for all of them. The students in Hawthorn Heights remarked on the attitudes of their teachers when a fellow student, who lived with his single mother, got a scholarship to university: "*Teachers were saying it was a great achievement for him*". Such normative assumptions and practices show how students are incited to recognise their own family in the particular way in which the school wants them to.

Interviewer: *Should there be more openness about different family forms in school?*

Jack: *Am yeah, I think so.*

Interviewer: *Do you want to explain that?*

Jack: *If a teacher is referring to family they say Mum and Dad, as if that's the only type. If they just said; you're family at home.*

Fox: *Or if a teacher is giving out he'd say; oh, I'll call your father, or I'll call your mother, and they may have split up.*

Laura: *Teachers say bring that home and get your parents to sign it.*

Abby: *When a teacher would say, what would your Mam and Dad think of what you'd done.*

Students were critical of their teachers for assuming that all students have the same sort of family as the teachers themselves, and said that some teachers treat students differently if they were not living in a `normal` (traditional) family. Most teachers tend to assume that students come from a traditional family form so their normalizing discourse and `regimes of truths` around `good` families tends to impose a homogenous standard of family living to which each individual student is directed. The subjectivity of students living in traditional family situations is constructed as `normal` while that of `others` is produced as different or troublesome; so that even when educators say nothing about family composition, their assumptions and blunders around family diversity reflect their views. Teachers are, consciously or unconsciously, transmitting values and judgements about family stereotyping; about which family form is valued, and which is not. This aspect of teacher care is the antithesis of pastoral care as envisaged by Collins (1999) who emphasises that:

*“The practices of identifying the students who are most vulnerable, and agreeing values and structures to meet the needs of these students, are at the heart of what we call a pastoral care school. The strength and effectiveness of our human communities, family, school, local and international community’s is rooted in how the most vulnerable members are included, supported and engaged meaningfully” (1999:33).*

*ii.) Silences around Family Diversity in School*

The question of whether it is better to tell schools or not to tell them if a family type is different to the norm prompted me to question students about the advantages and/or disadvantages for the students involved;

Interviewer: *Is it better for families to be open with the school about their family set-up or not?*

Sally: *If you`re adopted, if you have a step-mother etc., trying to explain bits and pieces, can be difficult, especially when it is brought up again and again. It`s worse in secondary school having to explain to each teacher all over again.*

Interviewer: *What are the advantages of educators knowing a student`s family set-up?*

Lisa: *In case a mother or father is dead, or divorced, for sensitive reasons. My generation are not sensitive about it at all. My aunt got divorced and remarried and keeps it very quiet.*

Interviewer: *What are the disadvantages?*

Lisa: *The fact that it`s private. Some are afraid that one teacher will tell another teacher. They think that they`ll treat them differently if they know.*

Fox: *It doesn`t really come up that often. Guys might get upset, so don`t bring it up. They (teachers) are all very careful not to mention family, in case they say something hurtful.*

Jack: *He (my friend) doesn`t want other people to know he`s feeling weird, doesn`t want anyone to mock him.*

Zoe: *There might be others who would be sniggering at them in class.*

Two central concerns were in evidence among students. One concern related to the issue of the silencing of family difference, and the other was the reaction of their peers to family difference. Fear of mockery by class-mates as a result of perceived family difference caused the students concerned to remain silent as a way of self-protection. The discursive construction of silence around family talk as a benefit for themselves is internalized by the students, in case of bullying or peer rejection. These silences entrench and rationalize an assumed ideal family type (traditional) because they allow fellow students and educators to maintain the illusion that one family type is valued more than others, and, by implication,



superior. It also gives students the message that family diversity does not matter, or does not really exist.

There were very few spaces which allowed for student agency to contest such constructs throughout the school day, consequently students are prevented from questioning family assumptions, since the deficit appears to be within their own domain. The internalisation of deficit reinforces a culture of silence around family difference. Time for critical questioning of the institutional practices is not encouraged as the education system's priority is constructed as educational rather than personal; there seems to be no space for family policy within the present school space. It is such internalisations and silences that Foucault has in mind when referring to the disciplining techniques of conformity, and how societies through institutions, such as schools, construct acceptable, 'normal' subjectivities, including the concept of normal/natural families. It makes populations easier to govern and thus, control. By providing a post-structuralist understanding of the limits of these knowledge bases and by demystifying school practices of 'expertise' and ethos, a rethinking of culpability is considered in the sense that it may be the system itself which is compounding and complicating family differences, through their texts, context and practices. Smyth (2006) argues:

*“The difficulty is that rather than containing within them the prospect of fixing the problem; a number of these measures have become deeply implicated in producing the problem in the first place and continuing to exacerbate it” (2006: 288).*

### *iii.) Fears of Exclusion around Family Talk in Class*

Students were fearful that teachers would feel differently about them or treat them differently if they knew that they came from a non-traditional family form. This last, it was felt, would be

far worse for students, since they do not want to be treated any differently from their fellow class-mates.

Hannah: *“Some people are very secretive about their family; they don’t like talking about family lives because you feel the centre of attention for teachers, and that presents a pressure, because they are tripping over themselves around you”.*

Lisa: *“My cousin’s teacher, when she found out, she said that was why she was playing up so much in school”.*

Non-traditional family forms can sometimes become an easy target for teachers who are looking for someone to blame for school underperformance. They are constructed as adding to teachers’ already overloaded workload, and as creating another complication for schools to deal with. Foucault’s lens would suggest that this is a subtle way of distancing families, (especially problematic ones), while constructing underperformance and/or disruption as a home problem rather than a school one. Most students associated contact between school and home with trouble. Practices involving teachers’ normalization, assumptions, silencing and the equating of family difference with trouble, or deficit, were among the key observations reported by the students about teachers. Communication faux pas were also mentioned as when I questioned Firth about his school secretary and contact with home, he replied;

*“They might call out the student by the wrong name, their father’s instead of their mother’s. All my friends kept their mother’s maiden name after they split up. They’ll always write down their mom’s name. The other name is said afterwards as a separate word”.*

The data from the interviewees suggest that students from non-traditional families experience serious non-recognition and mis-recognition. There is a dichotomy between what family means to him/her at home, as opposed to the normative family which is portrayed through mandatory school texts and classroom discourses. Students possess a strong desire for acceptance and recognition within the comfort of their classrooms but unfortunately, family diversity is not part of the accepted or expected discourse there. They felt that family

differences were judged as inferior, abnormal or deviant by their teachers. They expressed concern about labelling by teachers and fellow students and point to it as the reason why most students feel it is safer to be silent about their home life when in school. Mc Inerney, Smyth and Down (2011), in their writings on school space and students' feelings of belonging there, describe it as a bitter-sweet experience for many. They ask "*why would students want to engage in learning that seeks to nurture a love of a place where they feel excluded or oppressed*" (2011:10).

On the other hand, students across the three schools agreed that teachers are very understanding of their home situation if they know about it. What complicates things for teachers is that they are uncertain about whether the family set-up is being used as an excuse for not having homework done. It appears to undermine their authority in the classroom if they make allowances for certain students and not for others. Alva commented;

*"Yes, if teachers could stop saying, "Go home to your parents to ask...." It's like a little dig. Try not to say this and don't bite someone's head off if they use the excuse it's at my Dad's house, because when I give that excuse it really is at my Dad's house. It's not an excuse, I'm telling the truth".*

#### *iv.) Friends' Understanding of Family Change*

As outlined, the silences around family entities are embedded in the formal school discourses but it is not a silence among most students in their own life worlds. In school their identity is subsumed within the dominant institution's description of normality. The irony is that all the students reported that they talk about the topic of family forms among themselves, outside of the classroom. This raises the question as to whose interest is being served by the silencing of discussion on family diversity.

The students I interviewed reported that post-primary students from non-traditional family forms have to negotiate loyalties to peers, to educators and to their own family entity as they embody everyday classroom-bound conversations. They are caught in a double bind which is confusing and discriminatory (Butler 1990, Inglis and Mac Keogh, 2012); of needing to be recognised, but then constrained and ignored by how their identity is re-made into a deficit, in one of the major areas of their life; school. This involves struggling to maintain a working compromise between the meanings individuals attribute to themselves, and the social/institutional identities made available to them. In Smyth's (2006) view: "*Many young people are living multiple consciousness, living in one reality at home, in another reality with peers, and then negotiating another reality at school*" (2006: 290).

Some students also told about mothers reverting to their own name after separating from their spouses. This creates and reflects multiple consciousnesses and subjectivities when the student also changes their surname to that of their mother. It is perceived by the students as their way of subverting the system, of asserting their changed family status and of exercising their agency. Fox said, "*Like my friend in school goes by a different surname, at home we all call him by a different surname. Like, I know him as such and such and the school call him something else*". Another student, Firth, mentioned the importance of names also but from the perspective of intimidation and bullying: "*We have no problem talking about it (family) but sometimes it can go too far if someone mocks someone else's mom or something*". The absence of an adequate discourse around changing family names is another subtle way of silencing family difference across context, text and practices. This may, however, result in identity issues and mental health problems for students because their name and family are so important for their well-being. Freebody, Ludwig and Gunn (1995) refer to the cultural

discontinuities between schools and homes as “*interactive trouble*”, potentially leading to student drop-out, negative identity formation and a clash of frames of reference between both.

### **Conclusion: Family Form Diversity-A Challenge for School Discourses**

School discourses that assume the traditional family to be the only valid form of family composition, together with an idealization of same, still influence many everyday practices in post-primary settings, despite the fact that schools are obliged not to discriminate against any student on the grounds of family status (Equal Status Acts, 2000/2004). These assumptions are evident in overt and in covert ways. Overtly, in the form of teacher talk and blunders which presume a father and mother in every student`s home, and in curricular materials such as SPHE, RE, Home Economics and in language classes which reinforce the traditional type family structure. Student accounts reveal that they are being educated in both the institutional and ideological aspects of what is constructed as the `ideal family` in lessons which are influenced by the attitudes and assumptions of their teachers and text-books. They reported that the family type that teachers and curricular materials assume and value is that of the traditional family. Fear of rejection by teachers or fellow-students was reported by individuals whose family type is perceived as different or wrong. This data suggests that students in classrooms can be subjected to embarrassment, non-recognition and/or alienation when teachers and/or text book discourses reflect only a narrow family composition; that of an ideal, traditional, nuclear form. Lodge and Lynch (2004) reinforce this point:

*“Such attitudes can mean that those that do not belong to families that do not fit the traditional norm can experience a failure on the part of educational institutions to provide the conditions necessary to enable full participation; Some individuals may experience rejection or lack of recognition because of their different family status” (2004:33).*

A privileging of the traditional family type is also evident covertly in schools through the form of family silencing as a measure of benefit for students from families of diversity to

protect them from ridicule or hurt in relation to their family set-up. Students were unaware that it is the dominant discourse of the school which produces and structures these nuances and negative silences around diverse family forms. The majority of students displayed great trust in their school personnel and were unaware that their `confidential` profile (from admissions night) is available to all their teachers on a need to know basis (in keeping with the Child Protection Guidelines, 2004/2011). Student responses serve to highlight the gaps where texts and school discourses fail to correspond to the complexity of their family life. They come to see themselves and their family as the problem, not the institutional discourse. Because their family is unconventional it is blamed by the teachers as the cause of school difficulties, should these arise, since it seems to be unintelligible within the practices of the school. They reported that they have no issues with family diversity but it is clear that the adults in authority do.

The main challenges to family type diversity in Irish schools focuses on the embedded privileging of the traditional type family in institutional discourses in the form of teacher assumptions, school literature/communication with home/parent/s and in curricular texts which position teachers/schools as experts on the best or right type of family in the interests of maintaining the status quo. The fact that many students are not happy with these deficit discourses has serious implications and challenges for policy makers and school managements. My research advocates that teachers and school leaders, in all school contexts, should engage with family diversity discourses in order to undo the deficit generational attitudes while developing sustainable tolerance practices, and in so doing, improve communication and support for students between school and home. The family environment has changed in Ireland so the education system needs to change also through positive responses and inclusive measures for all family configurations, especially now that that they

are legally recognised by the Children and Family Relationships Bill (2014) and the passing of the Same-Sex Equality Act (2015). Respecting family difference should be highlighted and encouraged as a family right according to these Acts and from the perspective of school inclusion for all students and their families. The school as an institution has the potential to play an essential role in building socially cohesive communities through their nurturing of discourses which value familial differences, among other possibilities, so that all students feel included within their school space.

Contemporary objective family research and initial teacher education for inclusion and diversity are therefore areas for increased awareness-raising and tolerance so that family diversity need not be of the deficit model or feared as a negative. The balancing of approaches to family change also needs to permeate the text-books and subject departments, thereby making connections across the learning and lived experiences of all students. Family diversity advocates internationally find a common advocacy in developing respect for all family types through education and acceptance for difference. Advocates, such as Laidlaw (2006), claim that, “*all children learn when all families are respected*” (2006: 49).

Tokenistic amendments such as the references to parents/guardian considerations do not go far enough to vindicate the rights of parent/s or families who are not of the traditional family type. Therefore it is the contention of this paper that post-primary discourses surrounding the concept of family be modernised and circulated so that our education system can be a liberating and progressive force in twenty-first century Ireland. The implementation of a proposed Parent Charter may be an ideal avenue to enhance the role of parent/s and families within an effective school system, as well as a conduit for bringing about better partnership practices through official policies on family involvement in post-primary schools.

Communication between the school and home, whether oral or in written form, needs to convey an acceptance for all family compositions. The school-home relationship needs to focus less on family judgement and more on the importance of the mutual support that institutions, family and school; can offer to the student as s/he progresses through the system.

*“Embracing, supporting, and exploring the diversities that exist in classrooms can enlarge the space of the possible, and create opportunities for the emergence of new thinking and new ways of acting in the world. Thinking about difference, differently and using difference to make a difference” (2006: 52).*

In the above quotation, Laidlaw captures my own hope for family valuing and recognition in her assertion that the space in school can be expanded to allow for new ways of thinking and being in this world. Students would not have to be compartmentalized between school and home or between their personal and academic lives, but instead would benefit from an experience of a holistic and integrated education system, which in turn should ensure their well-being and a strong sense of identity as they venture forth amidst the challenges and diversities of adult and family life.



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## **Appendix 1 -Types of Research Activities Employed**

**Table 1**

<b>Type</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Analysis Used</b>
Family Discourse as Policy Text	National and local School Policies Curricular Material relating to School/Homes	Discourse tracing
Family Discourse as School Context	Case Studies of Three Post-Primary Schools	Discourse tracing of individual school policies and influence of ethos on PC
Family Discourse as School Practices	319 Senior Students in Four Post-Primary Schools surveys and interviews 14 student interviewed	Discourse tracing of 319 survey responses  Interviews were coded and categorised, and patterns were traced. Findings were crystallized to develop common themes across student discourses

## ***Appendix 2-Post-Primary Schools Involved***

**Table 2**

<b>School Name</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Interviews</b>	<b>Survey</b>
Hawthorn Heights School	Large urban all boys Catholic Post-Primary (532 students) City centre	5	41-4 <sup>th</sup> year 47-5 <sup>th</sup> year
St. Brigids School	Medium all girls Catholic urban Post-Primary (240 students) DEIS region	5	20-4 <sup>th</sup> year 42-5 <sup>th</sup> year 9 LCVP
Cogito College	Large all girls Catholic urban Post-Primary (481 students) Suburb	4	69-4 <sup>th</sup> year 66-5 <sup>th</sup> year

### *Appendix 3 Student Interviewees*

**Table 3**

<b>Students</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>Family Type</b>
Gerard	5 <sup>th</sup>	Hawthorn Heights	Lone parent, Mum and two older brothers, one younger sister
Darcy	5 <sup>th</sup>	Hawthorn Heights	Nuclear, Mum, Dad and two brothers
Firth	5 <sup>th</sup>	Hawthorn Heights	Nuclear, two older sisters
Fox	4 <sup>th</sup>	Hawthorn Heights	Reconstituted, Dad, Step-Mum, one step-sister, one step-brother
Jack	4 <sup>th</sup>	Hawthorn Heights	Reconstituted, Mum, Step-Dad, two sisters and one brother
Hannah	5 <sup>th</sup>	St. Brigits School	Reconstituted, Mum, Step-Dad, two sisters
Clare	5 <sup>th</sup>	St. Brigits School	Single Parent, one sister
Laura	5 <sup>th</sup>	St. Brigits School	Lone Parent, one brother
Abby	4 <sup>th</sup>	St. Brigits School	Nuclear, Mum, Dad, one brother, one sister
Steph	4 <sup>th</sup>	St. Brigits School	Reconstituted/Lone, Mam, two sisters, two half-sisters
Lisa	5 <sup>th</sup>	Cogito College	Nuclear, one brother, one sister
Sally	4 <sup>th</sup>	Cogito College	Nuclear, Mum, Dad, two sisters
Zoe	4 <sup>th</sup>	Cogito College	Nuclear, Mum, Dad, two sisters
Alva	4 <sup>th</sup>	Cogito College	Lone Parent/s, Mum, Dad, two sisters. Every second week with each