



# Consultation on the proposals for a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics: Final Report

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# Introduction

Consultation on the proposals for a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics began on November 3, 2015 and continued until March 31, 2016. The *Consultation Paper*, informed by three background studies (NCCA, 2015a; 2015b; Grayson et al., 2014) outlined the proposed rationale, vision, aims and features of the curriculum. The paper formed the basis for engagement during the consultation process, where participants were encouraged through the use of different consultation formats to respond to the proposals presented.

The aims of the consultation process were to identify the

- perceived opportunities and benefits of the proposals for Irish primary schoolchildren
- perceived challenges posed by the development of the proposals
- types of learning that currently take place in schools that may be supported by a curriculum in ERB and Ethics.

The NCCA engaged with a wide range of stakeholders during the consultation process. The target audiences included teachers, schools, parents, children, education partners, patrons, NCCA school networks, children's advocacy groups and members of the general public. The focus of the consultation process was not only to gather a critical mass of responses but also, and more importantly, to ensure a depth of engagement with the proposals presented in the supporting documentation. This approach provided the time, space and information for well-informed and considered responses to the consultation proposals.

To ensure the consultation was as far-reaching and inclusive as possible, the process was undertaken using a number of different formats such as online questionnaires, written submissions, discussion groups, school case-studies and meetings with education partners and interest groups. A conference, held in conjunction with Mary Immaculate College on *Inter-belief Dialogue in Contemporary Ireland*, provided an opportunity to raise awareness of the consultation process.

This report is organised using the following sections:

- Context
- Supporting engagement
- Consultation approach

- Consultation themes
- Directions for ERB and Ethics
- Concluding remarks.

The report presents the steps taken in the consultation. It outlines the key messages that arose across the formats and draws on relevant research undertaken by the NCCA<sup>1</sup> to support the development of the curriculum. Finally, the report presents the implications of introducing a curriculum in ERB and Ethics before outlining the directions that have emerged from consultation that map a path for the development of the curriculum.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of this research can be found at [www.ncca.ie/primary](http://www.ncca.ie/primary) and includes:

Darmody, M., and Smyth, E. (2016). *Teachers', parents' and the general public's views and expectations of the proposed primary school curriculum in education about religions and beliefs (ERB) and ethics*. Dublin: ESRI.

Grayson, H., O'Donnell, S. and Sargent, C. (2014a). *Key findings summary: Education about religions and beliefs and ethics in primary education*. Slough: National Foundation for Educational Research.

Grayson, H., O'Donnell, S. and Sargent, C. (2014b). *Curriculum structures and stages in primary education: Audit of policy across jurisdictions*. Slough: National Foundation for Educational Research.

McCoy, S., Smyth, E., Banks, J. (2010). *Learning in focus. The primary classroom: Insights from the growing up in Ireland study*. Dublin: NCCA.

NCCA. (2015a). An overview of education about religions and beliefs (ERB) and ethics content in patrons' programmes. Dublin: NCCA.

NCCA. (2015b). Encountering children in a curriculum for education about religions and beliefs (ERB) and ethics - A review: An educational and child's rights perspective. Dublin: NCCA.

Smyth, E. (2015). *Learning in focus. Wellbeing and school experiences among 9- and 13-year-olds: Insights from the growing up in Ireland study*. Dublin: NCCA.

# Context

The context within which the consultation on the proposals for a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics took place is an important consideration in the analysis of contributions to this process.

## The structure of the primary patronage system

Of the 3,124 mainstream primary schools<sup>2</sup> in Ireland, 96% are under the patronage of denominational organisations. In recent years, with the emergence of a more diverse population, school patronage in Ireland has been the subject of much consideration both at a policy level and within public discourse. *The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector: Report of the Forum's Advisory Group* (Coolahan et al., 2012) recommended, that in line with the wishes of parents, divestment of a certain number of denominational schools may be considered to provide more choice in education. Since the publication of the report in 2012, eleven schools have been divested, which represents a small fraction of the total number identified. In the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics, the unique composition of Ireland's primary sector, coupled with current debates about school patronage, has given rise to additional sensitivities over and above the general cut and thrust of debates about curriculum change in Ireland.

While the debate regarding school patronage may be seen as separate to the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics, the ownership and management of schools has a significant impact on how the primary curriculum is taught by teachers and experienced by children. This is evident in the Education Act (1998), Section 30(2)(b), which states that in prescribing a curriculum for schools, the Minister 'shall have regard to the characteristic spirit of a school'. With this provision, among others in the Act, schools and patrons have the right to teach elements of the primary school curriculum in accordance with the ethos of their schools. In denominational primary schools, the rights of the patron under the Act (1998) enable the school to teach the curriculum from the faith perspective of the patron: this would be evident in, for example, the teaching of Relationships and Sexuality Education

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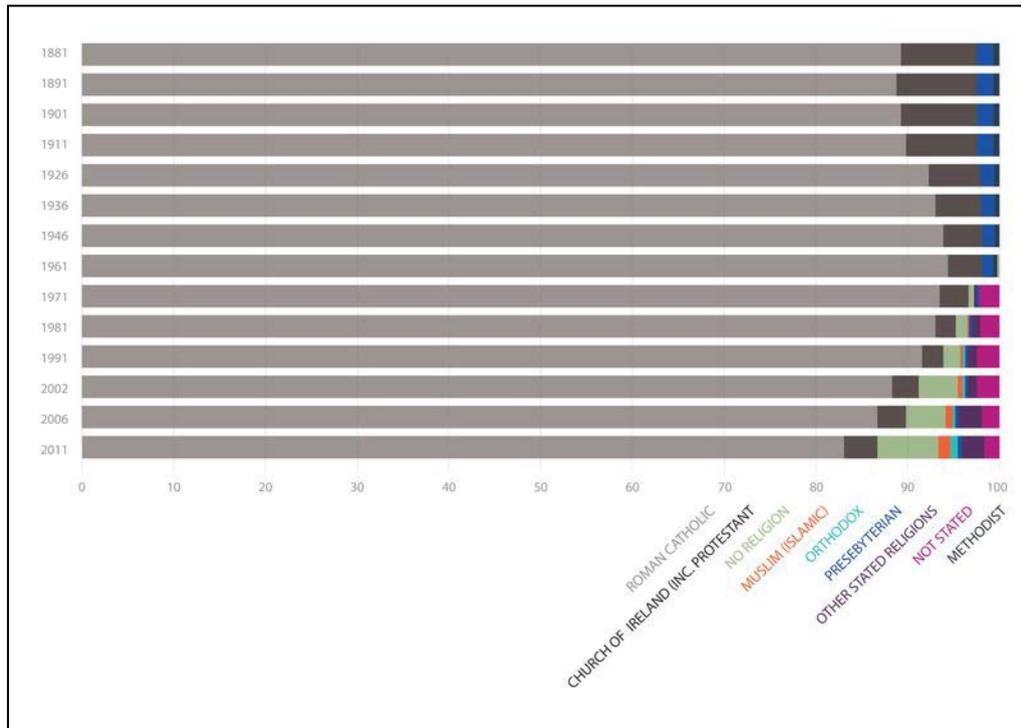
<sup>2</sup> Data obtained from DES statistics for 2015/2016, found here: <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Data-on-Individual-Schools/Data-on-Individual-Schools.html>

(RSE) within the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)<sup>3</sup> curriculum. Therefore the patronage and ownership of schools has a direct impact on how some elements of the primary school curriculum are presented to children.

## Changing classrooms

Primary classrooms have seen significant change on many levels in the last twenty years. One aspect of this relates to increasing religious diversity in society. Ireland has transformed from a predominantly Christian population to embrace a variety of religious and secular perspectives. The twenty years between 1991 and 2011 have seen significant increases in the non-Catholic population driven by not only growing number of citizens with no religion but increased diversity in the religions of newcomers from Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia. The 2011 census lists over 80 countries as places of birth for Irish residents at the time of its completion (CSO, 2011a). Figure 1 below, from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) provides an overview of the changing nature of religious affiliation in Ireland since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (CSO, 2012). Particularly evident from Figure 1 is the extent to which this change has accelerated in recent decades.

Figure 1: Percentage distribution of religious populations, 1881-2011



<sup>3</sup>The Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum states, 'Since SPHE has a moral and a spiritual dimension, its development and implementation are influenced significantly by the ethos or characteristic spirit of the school' (p. 2).

Greater diversity of religions and belief-systems are now visible in Ireland. In the census of 2011 the largest groups outside those who declared themselves as Catholic included 277,237 people who declared themselves as having no religion/atheist/agnostic, 129,036 declared Church of Ireland, 49,204 declared Muslims and 45, 223 declared Orthodox Christian (CSO, 2012).

In addition to religious, cultural and linguistic diversity, the integration of children with special educational needs into our mainstream classrooms has increased the range of abilities teachers now cater for. An important role of the primary curriculum is to support *all* children in their learning and to enable them to develop to their full potential. While changing classrooms provide a richness to our educational landscape they also provide challenges for schools and for teachers in their provision of education. In recent years, as the financial crisis has impacted on schools the challenges have increased. Supporting inclusive school environments remains a priority area of curriculum review and development.

## Curriculum overload

Since the primary curriculum was published in 1999, curriculum reviews (NCCA, 2005a; 2008a), research and work with schools have highlighted teachers' many successes with the curriculum but also challenges and calls for improvement. Teachers noted the emphasis on a theoretical rather than practical framework, and the need for additional practical support using different teaching resources, organisational settings, strategies for differentiation, and ways to promote higher-order thinking skills (NCCA, 2008a, p. 198). Since 1999, the publication of additional guidelines such as *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* (NCCA, 2007), *English as an Additional Language in Primary Schools: Guidelines for Teachers* (NCCA, 2006) and *Intercultural Education in the Primary School: Guidelines for Schools* (NCCA, 2005b) among others have contributed to this sense of curriculum expansion. Teachers have reported that curriculum overload, too much to do and too little time, is the greatest impediment to curriculum implementation (NCCA 2005a; 2008a). Recent years have also seen a raft of supplementary initiatives, such as *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines* (DES, 2011), which although not directly linked to the curriculum may also add to the sense of overload (INTO, 2015).

## A new primary curriculum

Recent years have seen significant developments by the NCCA in primary and early childhood education. The publication of *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* in 2009 has made a significant contribution to the early childhood education in the country. During the consultation on

ERB and Ethics the Department of Education and Skills (DES) published the new *Primary Language Curriculum/Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile*, developed by the NCCA, for junior infants to second class (2015). This marked the first step in redeveloping part of the primary curriculum since the launch of the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999). Work on developing the Primary Language Curriculum from third class to sixth class is also underway, while the NCCA is also currently developing a new primary mathematics curriculum.

In addition to these developments and as set out in *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020* (DES, 2011) the NCCA drew up proposals on time allocation across the curriculum in 2016. As part of this work the NCCA is also looking at the primary curriculum to consider if it needs to be restructured to meet the increased demands placed on schools. Drawing on an extensive body of research, Aistear is underpinned by an image of children as capable, competent and active learners who, in partnership with their teachers/practitioners, help shape their educational experience in early childhood and primary settings. Aistear describes children's learning and development through four themes: Well-being, Identity and belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and thinking. As Aistear continues to inform our understanding of what the early years in primary school may look like in time, the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics should be cognisant of such developments. For example, the theme of Identity and belonging relates to children developing a positive sense of who they are, and feeling that they are valued and respected as part of a family and community. Clear connections can be seen with this kind of learning and the learning outlined in the proposals for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics.

# Supporting engagement

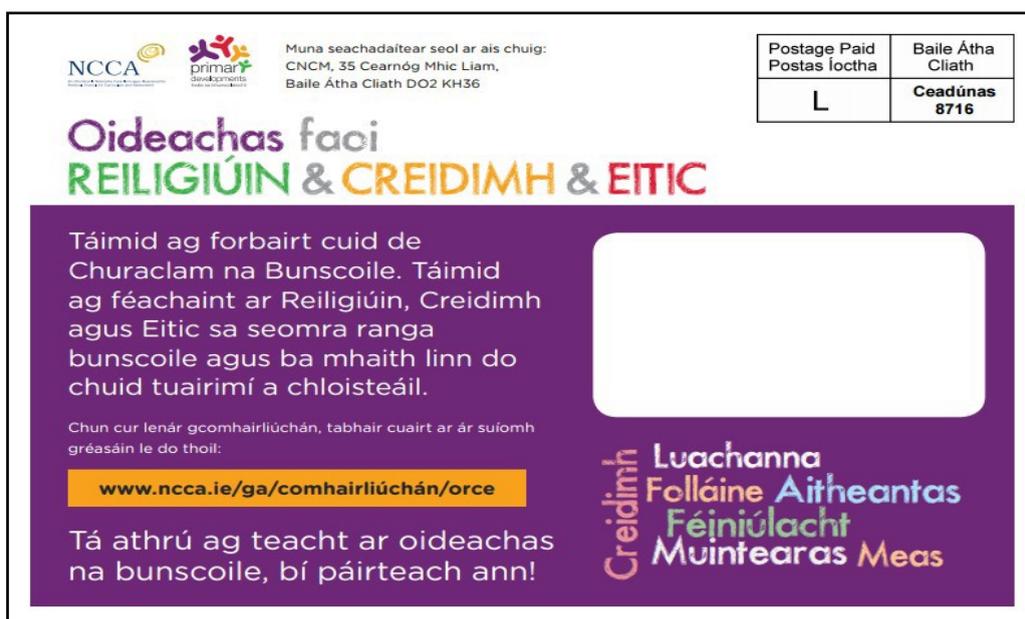
A range of consultation material was developed to support participants in their engagement with the ideas and proposals outlined in the *Consultation Paper*. Some of the material developed included:

- parent information sheets
- teacher information booklets
- an explanatory online video
- templates for written submissions
- a 'frequently asked questions' section on the consultation webpage.

All of the materials were made available in English and Irish on [www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe](http://www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe).

To raise awareness of the consultation, both an e-invite and a hard-copy postcard were sent to every primary school encouraging participation in the process. The e-invite was also circulated to recipients of the NCCA newsletter info@NCCA; some 2,000 teachers.

Figure 2: Consultation postcard (Gaeilge version)



Partner networks were also requested to circulate the invite to their members. The National Parents' Council Primary (NPC Primary) alerted their members to the consultation. Teacher booklets and

postcards were sent to every education centre to alert and inform teachers attending courses in the centre of the consultation process.

Education correspondents in the national media were informed of the start of the consultation process and received the *Consultation Paper* and supporting materials for reference. Articles appeared in national papers, while interviews were broadcast on national and local radio explaining the proposals and drawing attention to the consultation process. A Twitter campaign, with the hashtag #ERBE, was also undertaken to generate interest and participation.

Figure 3: Example of a tweet to raise awareness of the ERB and Ethics consultation



The NCCA actively sought opportunities to meet with interest groups and stakeholders to discuss the proposals and support them in making a written submission to the consultation. The NCCA also availed of opportunities to link in with education partners on events or initiatives throughout the consultation process. These included the INTO Consultative Conference (18-19 November 2015), the ETBI John Marcus O’Sullivan Conference (12-13 November 2015) and the Mary Immaculate College Conference on *Inter-Belief Dialogue in Contemporary Ireland* (17 February 2016).

Furthermore, to support the public’s engagement with the underpinning ideas and concepts of the curriculum, the background research conducted by and on behalf of the NCCA was made available online. This included an audit by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) of state

provision internationally, a desktop overview of patrons' programmes and a paper exploring the foundations of the curriculum in children's rights.

# Consultation approach

The consultation process involved a range of formats with the aim of gathering high quality feedback on the proposals for the development of the curriculum.

## Methodological approach

The consultation formats included:

- online questionnaires
- written submissions
- meetings with interest groups
- school case-studies
- discussion groups with teachers and parents
- participation at conferences.

An overview of each of these is provided below.

### **Online questionnaires**

The use of online questionnaires enabled the gathering of a broad range of contributions. Three questionnaires were designed (Appendices 1, 2 and 3); one for teachers and third-level educators, one for parents and guardians and one for interested members of the general public. The interest in the consultation produced a record number of completed questionnaire responses for the NCCA, with 2,255 received during the process.

While the use of questionnaires as a format for consultation was not intended to produce a representative sample, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) in their reporting on the use of questionnaires drew attention to the fact that the sample was self-selecting and was therefore, not necessarily representative. In other words, the responses to the questionnaires may be biased towards respondents who felt particularly strongly about the proposed curriculum.

Although the questionnaire was piloted, some respondents (e.g. individuals not working in schools) found some questions 'not applicable'. In addition, the questionnaire allowed respondents to move

from question to question without ensuring that all questions were answered. Finally, it was noted by some participants and by the ESRI that attitudinal questions were skewed towards positive answers in the questionnaire design.

While mindful of the considerations outlined above, the questionnaires received a significant response from educators, parents and the general public and provide useful information to feed into the process of development for a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics. It is also evident that for many participants, the online questionnaire was less about the draft proposals and more about broader issues relating to the structure of Irish primary education.

### **Written submissions**

Written submissions are an important part of the NCCA consultation process. To support interest groups and respondents with drafting their submissions, a template was developed. The template encouraged respondents to consider the proposals, the potential contribution of the curriculum to the life of the child and to reflect generally on the proposed curriculum. Respondents were not compelled to use the template, although many did.

At the time of publication of this report, the NCCA had received 174 written submissions, the findings from which have been described in the following section of this report. While submissions outline the position of a group in relation to proposed changes, the consultation also found that there could be significant variation of opinion within groups. The written submissions are available to view online at [www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe](http://www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe) and an index of the submissions is provided in Appendix E in this report.

### **Meetings with interest groups**

Organisations with a particular interest in ERB and ethics were invited by the NCCA to meet to discuss the proposals outlined in the consultation material. Furthermore, an open invitation was issued and promoted online to any other group that wished to engage. Throughout the consultation process, the NCCA met with these groups to support them in providing written submissions to the process. The interest groups that availed of the opportunity to meet with the NCCA included:

- An Foras Pátrúnachta
- Atheist Ireland
- Catholic Primary Schools Management Association (CPSMA)
- Children's Rights Alliance (CRA)
- Church of Ireland Board of Education (CIBE)

- Community National Schools
- Educate Together
- Equate Ireland
- Humanist Association of Ireland
- Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC)
- Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO)
- Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN)
- Islamic Foundation of Ireland (IFI)
- National Parents Council, Primary (NPCP)
- Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO)
- Secular Schools Ireland Ltd.

### **School case-studies**

In order to gain an insight into the complexities of the issues concerning implementation of a new curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics and to engage with schools on their current practice, the NCCA worked with seven case-study schools. The criteria for selecting schools included the following:

- DEIS/non-DEIS
- denominational/multi-denominational
- English-medium schools/Irish-medium schools
- urban/rural
- school size.

An overview of the seven schools is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Overview of case-study schools

School number	Denominational/multi-denominational	DEIS/non-DEIS	Urban/rural	English medium/Irish medium	School size
1.	Catholic	DEIS	Urban	English medium	c. 200
2.	Multi-denominational	Non-DEIS	Urban	Irish medium	c. 180
3.	Catholic	Non-DEIS	Urban	English medium	c. 450
4.	Catholic	Non-DEIS	Rural	English medium	c. 70
5.	Educate Together	DEIS	Rural	English medium	c. 130
6.	Church of Ireland	Non-DEIS	Rural	English medium	c. 200
7.	Community National School	Non-DEIS	Urban	English medium	c. 250

The case-study research investigated two questions:

1. What practices are currently taking place in schools that lend themselves to the type of teaching and learning envisaged in a curriculum for ERB and Ethics?
2. What are the perceived opportunities and challenges that the introduction of the proposed curriculum may have for schools?

The questions were explored by facilitating discussion groups with teachers, school leaders, parents, children and boards of management. Although findings from this kind of research are not generalisable, they are extremely useful in identifying issues that do not emerge through broad consultation formats.

The school case-studies were developed to add depth to the themes emerging in the consultation. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, participants drew on their experience and provided relevant examples from their practice. The research provided an insight into the reality of what is happening in the local school context and the opportunities and challenges that are presented by the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics. Participants, in their responses, provided links to their immediate environment and experience at local level which have greatly informed the consultation process.

Significantly, the school case-studies also provided opportunities to work with children in the schools. In order to do this, consent was received from the parents of each child in fourth, fifth and sixth class.

Children from the senior end of primary school were selected using a 'fitness for purpose' model (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 117) taking into account accessibility to the sample and the human resources available to the NCCA. Prior to the visit, teachers were provided with stimulus material to encourage children to engage with some of the ideas and concepts behind the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics. In the presence of the classroom teacher, NCCA personnel worked with the children in whole-class settings and in smaller groups. Many of the participating children remarked that they appreciated the opportunity to explain why some of the concepts relating to ERB and Ethics are important to them and to talk about how they like to learn about such things. Responses were recorded by the children themselves, using a template provided (see Appendix D), and by an NCCA observer who took field notes during the process.

Given that the engagement with schools was confined to the period of the consultation, this engagement did not include observation over time, and relied heavily on data provided by the school. Such constraints did not allow for in-depth field observations and instead the research relied upon data that was self-reported from the school community. It was notable that a high number of the parents who met with the NCCA were members of the parents' association or board of management. Despite timetabling considerations resulting in some teachers not being able to attend the teacher sessions, a representative sample of teachers across the schools was achieved. Finally, while the NCCA did work with children in the senior end of primary school, the longer-term time involvement necessary to work with younger children was not possible to undertake during the consultation process.

### **Discussion groups with teachers and parents**

Five discussion groups were held with teachers in education centres around the country. The locations were chosen to provide a broad geographical representation. While the school case-studies provided the opportunity to listen to school communities in their own environment, the discussion groups allowed teachers from different schools to come together, engage in rich discussion and provide their feedback on the proposals. The discussions provided teachers with the opportunity to consider and respond to the views of others who were coming from different backgrounds and who taught in different contexts. An overview of the education centres is provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Overview of discussion groups with teachers

	Venue	Date
1.	Drumcondra Education Centre	25 November 2015
2.	Athlone Education Centre	21 January 2016
3.	Cork Education and Support Centre	2 February 2016
4.	Kildare Education Centre	8 February 2016
5.	Ionad na Múinteoirí, Ionad Oideachais Ghort a' Choirce	16 February 2016

Teachers were invited to attend by the education centres who sent flyers advertising the sessions to schools within their area. The sessions were also advertised on the consultation webpage. In total, 28 teachers attended these discussion groups. As a self-selecting sample, participants tended to have a strong interest in the proposed curriculum, which provided the basis of informed and robust engagement with the underlying concepts of the proposals.

A discussion group with 14 parents was also held with the members of the National Parents' Council Primary (NPC Primary) assembly in Dublin on January 30. This discussion group focused on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that arise from the proposals as well as exploring solutions to the perceived obstacles.

### Participation in conferences

Opportunities to link in with education partners on events or initiatives relating to the development of a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics were explored. The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) Consultative Conference on *Curriculum* (17-18 November 2015) provided an opportunity to address delegates on the proposals for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics. Two workshops with teachers were also facilitated at the conference, both of which were fully subscribed. Attendees included trade union representatives, teachers and principals.

The John Marcus O'Sullivan Conference *Religion, Diversity & Publicly-Managed Schools* (12-13 November 2015) provided an opportunity to brief the post-primary and Community National School sector on developments at primary. This conference was attended by CEOs, deputy CEOs and school leaders of the vocational sector in Ireland.

The NCCA in partnership with Mary Immaculate College hosted a conference on *Inter-belief Dialogue in Contemporary Ireland* (17 February 2016). The event brought together delegates from diverse religious and belief backgrounds, as well as student teachers from the college. The keynote was given

by Dr. Julia Ipgrave, Senior Research Fellow in the Centre for Education Studies in the University of Warwick. The NCCA also presented a keynote address on the development of a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics and its potential to promote inter-belief dialogue in the classroom.

### Data analysis and presentation

A significant amount of data was gathered across all formats of the consultation. The methods of recording the data and its analysis are detailed in Table 3.

Table 3: Data-gathering method, recording and analysis

Data-gathering method	Recording of data	Analysis of data undertaken by
<b>School case-studies</b>	Written submissions by children Field notes	NCCA primary team
<b>Discussion groups with teachers and parents</b>	Written submissions by teachers Field notes	NCCA primary team
<b>Meetings with interest groups</b>	Field notes Written submissions	NCCA primary team
<b>Online questionnaires</b>	Self-reported online submissions	Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI)
<b>Participation in conferences</b>	Self-reported video recordings Written submissions Field notes	NCCA primary team
<b>Written submissions</b>	Online and paper based submissions	NCCA primary team

Due to the volume of responses to the online questionnaire, it was decided the data sets would be analysed and reported upon by an outside agency. Following a tendering process, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) was successful and have provided a detailed report on these findings (Darmody & Smyth, 2016). The report generated by the ESRI details individual responses from parents, educators and the general public; as well as providing commentary on some implications for policy development. The full report is available at [www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe](http://www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe) (see Appendix G for a summary of the findings).

In the analysis of the data across the formats of consultation, patterns began to emerge in responses. As these patterns emerged, a thematic structure was developed to code and organise data into categories for analysis. Eight key themes relating to curriculum development emerged across the full data set: curriculum overload and time constraints; school ethos; skills and dispositions; inclusive practices in schools; alignment with the primary school curriculum; the role of the teacher; age appropriateness of ERB and Ethics; and what this learning type of learning may look like. The data was

categorised accordingly, has been analysed and is presented in this report in the following section. Where contributions raised questions concerning systemic matters or questions that went beyond the scope of curriculum development, they were not considered as key themes, although they have informed some of the additional commentary later in this report. Quotations have been used to illustrate the types of responses relating to a given theme and were selected from across the consultation formats. The report seeks to present a balance of views reflective of those that emerged during the consultation.

# Consultation themes

This section outlines the key themes that arose during consultation concerning curriculum development and the proposed implementation of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics. The themes addressed below are:

- curriculum overload and timeconstraints
- school ethos
- skills and dispositions
- alignment with the primary schoolcurriculum
- inclusive practices inschools
- role of the teacher
- age appropriateness of ERB and Ethics
- what the learning might look like: children’s perspective<sup>4</sup>.

Given the volume of responses and breadth of feedback the themes are not intended to be exhaustive. Equally, the voices and opinions included in the report are also not intended to be definitive. Instead, the report includes a cross-section of opinions from participants to ensure that the diversity of opinion is represented. Where quotes are included individuals are not named, but their position or role in relation to education is retained, where possible. Where organisations or groups are quoted, their names are cited. Quotes are intended to be illustrative of prominent themes that arose during consultation. Furthermore, the consultation sought to inform and advance the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics rather than addressing matters of a systemic nature. Although this report may refer to such matters in the context of curriculum development, a satisfactory response to these issues is beyond the scope of the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics.

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<sup>4</sup>The report highlights seven themes that arose across all formats of consultation. However, the report also includes an eighth theme that stemmed directly from the work with the case-study schools, and in particular the voices of children. As the participants in the other formats were all adults it was felt that it was important to also ensure that the voices of children were heard prominently in consultation, and therefore a specific section has been allocated for this purpose.

## Curriculum overload and time constraints

One theme that emerged consistently from teachers and school leaders relates to curriculum overload and time allocation. Although these were structural factors relating to the totality of the primary curriculum and therefore outside the remit of the development of ERB and Ethics, it was felt that they provided a significant barrier to its introduction. There was a general perception that the primary school curriculum is 'overloaded' and, therefore, teachers struggle to cover the curriculum within the school day. It is clear from responses to the consultation that participants' understandings of curriculum overload extends beyond the Primary School Curriculum, incorporating the various initiatives, guidelines and directives that have been introduced since the introduction of the curriculum in 1999. This process of continually adding to the curriculum and the feeling of 'overload' has previously been highlighted in the *Primary Curriculum Reviews* (NCCA 2005, 2008), as well as the NCCA report on *Curriculum Overload in Primary Schools* (2010). For many teachers responding to the consultation, the question of curriculum overload posed a challenge to the feasibility of the introduction of ERB and Ethics. A common response was: '[we] all recognise the value of such a programme, but where is the time?' (Discussion group participant). The introduction of any initiative regardless of its merits was thereby seen as challenging.

The above sentiment was echoed by many across all consultation formats. The online questionnaires highlighted the twin issues of time allocation and curriculum overload as challenges most frequently referred to by teachers regardless of school type (Darmody & Smyth, 2016), illustrated in the statement below:

As has already been mentioned, curriculum overload. Schools are pushed to the pins of their collars time wise in trying to get the core subjects done and done well....govt. obsession with rising standards and PISA type tables. This will always seem to take precedence over the development of a harmonious, happy and creative society. (Educator, multi/interdenominational, questionnaire)

The above quotation encapsulates the opinions of many teachers in the consultation who felt that there was increased pressure on schools and classrooms to cover a greater workload. The potential risk of overstretching and trying to cover too much and therefore affecting the quality and depth of learning was highlighted:

Curriculum over load; therefore surface learning. I feel it could work well if modelled and combined with the current SPHE Curriculum OR another option would be to either reduce or eradicate the time current allocation to teaching religion in schools. (Educator, minority faith)

This emphasis on time constraints and curriculum overload also emerged strongly in written submissions. The INTO submission highlighted it as the most significant challenge to the introduction of the curriculum:

The main challenge relates to time constraint. Teachers are already experiencing an overloaded curriculum. Before the introduction of a curriculum for ERB and Ethics is introduced, teachers require clarification regarding time allocation, planning and resources. (INTO written submission)

The issue was described, not alone by teachers and school leaders, but by patrons, interested organisations and parents. It was also highlighted repeatedly during the school case-studies and in discussions with teachers in education centres. Indeed, NCCA research into experiences from other jurisdictions (NCCA, 2010) has demonstrated that this is an international phenomenon and is not peculiar to the Irish context. Clearly, the question of time allocation within the curriculum is a systemic issue that needs to be addressed before further work continues on ERB and Ethics. The section on Direction for ERB and Ethics later in this report provides some guidance for overcoming this challenge.

## School ethos

As referred to in the 'Context' section of this paper, with the provision of Section 30 (2)(b) in the Education Act (1998), school ethos has direct implications for the implementation and teaching of the Primary School Curriculum. Throughout the consultation, the centrality of ethos to the work undertaken in schools emerged consistently, across all school types.

The ethos of a Catholic school is not a discrete element of school life confined only to formal religious instruction. Ethos is a living thing that finds expression through relationships, policies, practices attitudes and the work of the school. (Catholic Primary School Education Secretariat for the Archdiocese of Cashel and Emly & Dioceses of Kerry, Killaloe and Limerick, written submission)

Although the above quotation refers specifically to Catholic schools, the description of ethos as a living thing that finds expression throughout the work of the school has been equally described across all school types. It is an all-encompassing and pervasive feature of school life. During school visits participants in both denominational and multi-denominational settings, highlighted the importance of core school values. The role that ethos plays in fostering a sense of belonging, supporting pupil identity and contributing to positive learning environments was underlined across all consultation formats.

Two key sub-themes emerged during consultation in relation to ethos, which were:

- the relationship between ERB and Ethics and schoolethos

- the relationship between ERB and Ethics and the patron’s programme.

### **Relationship between ERB and Ethics and school ethos**

Two divergent viewpoints emerged during the consultation in regards to the relationship between ERB and Ethics and school ethos.

#### *The potential challenge for school ethos*

The first view reflected a concern that a curriculum in ERB and Ethics could potentially conflict with school ethos. In particular, this related to a fear that ERB and Ethics could undermine or challenge the ethos of denominational schools. This position was in strong evidence in written submissions, although much less evident in other consultation formats. Attention was drawn to Section 30 (2)(d) of the Education Act (1998), which as noted earlier, states that in prescribing a curriculum for schools, the minister ‘shall have regard to the characteristic spirit of a school’. While this section of the Education Act (1998), and others, endorses the rights of the patron body, it may also limit the types of teaching and learning outlined in a curriculum for ERB and Ethics, if they are perceived as being contrary to the ethos of the school.

In written submissions, reservation was expressed concerning the philosophical underpinnings of the proposals for ERB and Ethics. This was expressed by both Catholic and Church of Ireland schools.

The Church of Ireland Board of Education (“the Board”) has no difficulty with the generality of what is described in pages 12 to 18 of the NCCA Consultation paper. However, the Board is concerned that the general perspective of the proposed ERB and Ethics curriculum sits incongruously with the perspective of the existing Follow Me RE curriculum. (The Church of Ireland General Synod Board of Education, written submission)

This reservation was primarily expressed in three ways: the basis of the Ethics component was questioned; the proposals were perceived to be liberal, secular or agnostic; the pluralist and constructivist approaches proposed in the consultation materials were highlighted as potentially challenging to the ethos of denominational schools.

Some anxiety was expressed around the basis for the Ethics component of the proposals. For some respondents, ethical learning could not be separated from a particular religious perspective. It was suggested that the underpinnings of the Ethics component could contradict and be in conflict with such a perspective.

The Ethics component endorses the morality of secular liberalism wherein individual moral autonomy is considered an ultimate end in itself. Such an approach is incompatible with the emphasis Christian moral theology places on theocentric personalism, objective moral goods and norms, the virtues, and the

harmony between the individual's good and the common good. (6 teacher educators from theology and/or psychology backgrounds, written submission)

The human rights perspective which has informed the proposals for the Ethics component of the curriculum was considered by some respondents to be potentially challenging in the context of the ethos of denominational schools. It was suggested in some submissions that the proposals represented liberal, secular or agnostic values and therefore directly challenge denominational school ethos.

It was also argued that a pluralist approach, as understood by respondents, to learning about religions and beliefs might be a challenge for denominational schools. According to the Catholic Primary Schools Management Association:

It encourages pupils to see their religion as one among many standpoints which have equal validity. This arguably encourages a form of religious relativism. This pedagogical process suggested by NCCA is completely at odds with the way in which religious education is taught in Catholic schools. (Catholic Primary Schools Management Association, written submission)

Similarly, the constructivist approach supported by the proposals for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics was also highlighted as being a potential challenge for Catholic schools. It was suggested that this might conflict with how a child learns from within their own tradition:

The NCCA document favours a 'child-centred' approach that leads to 'co-construct' their knowledge identity and culture with peers and adults and in turn generate their own meaning and knowledge. The idea that a 6 year old child can simply discern about religious matters as proposed in the NCCA model is not substantiated and conflicts with the concept of a child learning from within their own tradition or community and then moving to evaluate or critique in the later years. (Education Secretariat of the Dublin Diocese, written submission)

The child-centred approach outlined in the proposals for ERB and Ethics, underpins the entire *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999) and is at the heart of the learning that currently takes place in Irish primary schools. Although such reservations were very evident in some of the written submissions, interestingly they did not emerge as strongly in questionnaires or when working with teachers and boards of management in case-study schools.

The question of the relationship between school ethos and ERB and Ethics was also evident in the feedback from parents during consultation. For some parents, ERB and Ethics could provide an opportunity to further promote and develop acceptance, tolerance and inclusion within denominational schools:

My children come from an atheist family and attend a Catholic school. I would like this curriculum to improve acceptance of them, as non believers, within the school

community. I would like them to really feel that it is ok not to believe in god.  
(Parent, questionnaire)

This view was particularly apparent in the questionnaires, but also arose during school visits. However, the counter-perspective, in which ERB and Ethics was seen to challenge the ethos of denominational schools, was also in evidence in the parents' questionnaires, and also in the written submissions from parents.

As a Catholic Parent I want my children to be educated in the Catholic Ethos and to be taught their religion in the school. I do not want to have my child denied this right and believe that the curriculum must cater for this in a significant way and not be such that the school is denied the right to educate children in Catholic Doctrine. (Parent, questionnaire)

It is clear from the quote above that some parents conflated the introduction of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics with the possibility of the removal of the patron's right to educate in a Catholic tradition. It must be noted also that many respondents, including parents and teachers, affirmed the possibility of the proposals as supporting diversity within Catholic primary schools:

Developing ERB and Ethics can only enhance the overall education of children, making them more tolerant of difference and informing them of the wider world in which we live. It also will provide children the opportunity to engage with opinions and beliefs that will challenge their own, leading to greater empathy and understanding of their school friends and broader community. (Educator, Catholic school, questionnaire)

### *The potential challenge posed by school ethos*

The second viewpoint in relation to ethos emphasised the challenge to the curriculum and the rights of children from a different belief background to that of the school. It was questioned whether Section 30 of the Education Act (1998) allowed for ERB and Ethics to be implemented in a manner that was 'objective, critical and pluralistic' (ODIHR, 2007, p. 68, 88, 104) in line with the Toledo Guidelines.

We cannot see how this proposed course will promote respect for our human rights, given the fact that the NCCA have no power to ensure that schools deliver this course in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner and in accordance with the Toledo Guiding Principles and human rights law. (Atheist Ireland, written submission)

The tension between promoting and supporting the ethos of the school and the equal treatment of all children in our education system is very evident in this response. Thus, concern was expressed that ERB and Ethics may not be implemented in a way that is consistent, from a human rights perspective, across all school types. It was suggested that when ERB and Ethics is implemented in line with the ethos of the school, this may undermine the objective, critical and pluralistic approach to teaching the

subject which was advocated for in the proposals for consultation. This was expressed clearly by those respondents who were concerned about the ability of schools to provide for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics for all children, regardless of their religion or belief, and not simply for those who belonged to the religion of the denominational school.

To be confident that the new curriculum will maintain the constitutional and internationally agreed human rights of every child in every classroom, assurances need to be given that whatever form this Education about Religions and Beliefs & Ethics curriculum takes, it will be delivered as an independent, integral state curriculum separate from any patron programme. (Equate, written submission)

### **ERB and Ethics and the patron's programme<sup>5</sup>**

Related to questions of ethos was the question of how ERB and Ethics can co-exist beside the patron's programme in a school. As background research to the consultation, the NCCA conducted an overview of existing patron programmes exploring how current content found in these programmes may support, or otherwise, the types of teaching and learning proposed in ERB and Ethics<sup>6</sup>. While this study only examined the content of these programmes and not the experience of children in the classroom, it did raise questions as to the complementary nature of these programmes and the proposed state curriculum in ERB and Ethics. This also drew considerable attention from participants of the consultation, with many questioning how ERB and Ethics and the patron's programme can complement each other. As one discussion group participant asked, 'Where does ERB and Ethics fit in along with the Patron's programme and SPHE?' (Discussion group participant).

Indeed, the need to clarify the relationship between ERB and Ethics and the patron's programme in denominational schools was regularly discussed during the consultation. In their written submission, Educate Together addressed the issue of how the proposals related to the Learn Together curriculum.

Educate Together would favour the development of ERB and Ethics as a discrete curriculum. In doing so, we recognise that there will inevitably be an overlap with the Learn Together curriculum, which we feel can easily be negotiated. (Educate Together, written submission)

This response echoed feedback from teachers in Community National Schools, who noted similarities to the Goodness Me, Goodness You! programme. An Foras Pátrúnachta, who manage a cross-section

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<sup>5</sup>The patron's programme refers to the programme or curriculum developed by a patron to underpin and promote the ethos of their schools. The Education Act (1998) recognises the legal right for patrons to design, supervise, implement and teach their programmes. For the majority of patrons their programme addresses the area of religious education. Schools are legally entitled to devote a reasonable amount of time daily to the teaching of these programmes.

<sup>6</sup>This report, *An Overview of Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics Content in Patrons' Programmes* can be found at [www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe](http://www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe)

of denominational, interdenominational and multi-denominational schools, state that the programme used in their multi-denominational schools is suitable for a national curriculum. This reflects the findings in the NCCA overview of ERB and Ethics content in patrons' programmes which notes that multi-denominational approaches, although quite varied, may be more compatible with a state curriculum in ERB and Ethics. While there may be some variation in how Educate Together schools, Community National Schools and Irish-medium multi-denominational schools approach the teaching and learning of religions, beliefs and ethics; the fact that they are not taught from a faith perspective ensure this teaching is suitable for children of all religious and belief perspectives.

However, the relationship between the proposals and the patrons' programmes of denominational schools was considered to be more challenging.

The relationship between confessional RE and the ERB and Ethics programme needs to be explored-will teachers be expected to shift from teaching that one particular religion is 'truth' during one part of the day, and then move to an objective stance later in the same day, whereby children are taught that many beliefs systems and worldviews are possible? (Senior lecturer in Education, Marino Institute of Education, written submission)

The above quotation reflects a prominent thread running through the consultation, which questioned the management at school level of the proposed aims of ERB and Ethics with the requirements of the patrons' programmes in denominational schools. Some participants in the consultation queried how it was possible to teach the patron's programme through a faith lens and then teach ERB and Ethics in a way that was 'objective, critical and pluralist' (ODIHR, 2007, p. 68) as presented in the proposals for consultation. This issue was also flagged in the NCCA report on the overview of patrons' programmes. For example, it was suggested that the new Catholic Religious Education Curriculum and the newly developed Grow in Love programme covered much of the content of the proposals, thereby calling into question the necessity of a new curriculum. However, such responses fail to explain how all children, including those of different beliefs to that of the school and who may opt-out of participating in faith-based programmes, are provided with appropriate learning in this area and catered for in such a scenario. It is clear from the consultation that patrons of denominational schools felt that a tension exists between the teaching of the patron's programme and the introduction of ERB and Ethics.

These tensions were illustrated, in a practical way, by the home-school liaison teacher in one of the denominational case-study schools who noted that some parents, including parents of a Traveller background, had expressed strong reservations about such a curriculum. From these parents, there was a concern in regards to the teaching about other religions, and fear that faith formation would be

diminished as a result. For these parents, the ethos and identity of the school along with the practices and the instruction of faith formation was very important to them:

...I believe that when we set out to start our family my husband and I promised to bring them up and teach them about our catholic faith and I think that at such a young age it would be confusing for them. (Parent, written submission)

However, it must also be added that significant concerns were raised during the consultation that ERB and Ethics would either simply be subsumed into the denominational patrons' programmes or taught through a faith lens, thus undermining the aims of the curriculum. Yet, the opportunity for ERB and Ethics to cater for the human rights of all children, if developed in an appropriate manner, was evident in the consultation.

It offers schools like my own an opportunity to be more inclusive of children whose families do not conform to the single faith ethos of the school and in so doing that ethos will become more welcoming and embracing. (Educator, questionnaire)

Clearly, the relationship between the development of ERB and Ethics and school ethos is one that needs to be further explored and will be addressed in the section on directions for ERB and Ethics.

## Skills and dispositions

One theme that emerged strongly during the consultation was a desire for ERB and Ethics to contribute to learning that fostered skills and dispositions which enable children to engage positively with the world in which we live. Although specific content knowledge was acknowledged as important, a greater emphasis on the development of skills and dispositions was evident. This was often seen as linked to social and emotional learning with an emphasis on nurturing positive relationships.

ERB and Ethics was seen by many as important because it reflects the realities of the world in which children live. This was evidenced in Darmody and Smyth (2016, pp. 16-30) which noted broad support for the general aims of ERB and Ethics across stakeholders.

Children's experience of diversity in their worlds was highlighted as providing a strong rationale for the proposals and for the development of the skills and dispositions necessary to flourish. It was pointed out by a parent in a Catholic school that as children make their way in the world they will encounter people from 'all walks of life' (Parent, Catholic school) and, therefore, the type of learning proposed in ERB and Ethics was necessary. This was seen by some as reflecting the reality of life for today's children:

...These are so fundamental to growing up and being in the world. If this change means more self awareness, interpersonal awareness a sense of responsibility to make the world a better place for oneself and others then I am 100% in favour and

think this will contribute strongly to lessen bullying and self esteem issues.  
(Member of the general public, questionnaire)

Questions related to religious diversity arise organically in all schools, both denominational and multi-denominational. It was noted by one teacher during the school case-studies that children in first and second class notice 'the differences in the class, different skin colour, different religions, whatever...'  
(Teacher, Catholic school). The opportunity to engage positively with diversity arose in the questionnaires responses.

ERB & Ethics should provide a framework through which young people acquire the skills & tools to engage and connect with our pluralist society guided by strong morals, a personal sense of justice and fair play to inform empathetic and effective decision-making. (Educator, questionnaire)

Sacramental preparation was highlighted by one parent during the school case-studies as a time when conversations about different practices and belief traditions were opened up at home, particularly by children who didn't participate in the sacrament. It was suggested that such experiences also offer opportunities to open up discussions when they occur in the classroom, something that many teachers do already. It would seem that such discussions are important to ensure that all children feel a sense of belonging and inclusion within the school community. Otherwise, children who do not participate in the faith formation programme of the school risk feeling isolated. Parents in one of the multi-denominational case-study schools noted that their children had previously attended denominational schools, but had found the experience very isolating. Therefore, the child's parents had moved them to a multi-denominational setting. However, the experience of isolation is by no means the universal experience of children who attend denominational schools and who are not members of the faith of the school. It seems to depend greatly on the type of practices and discussions that take place in schools, something that is highlighted in greater detail in the theme below on inclusive school practices.

It wasn't just the child's immediate experience that was highlighted as important during consultation, but also their interaction with the world beyond their communities. Children's exposure to recent international tragedies, specifically linked to religious extremism, was raised by some as justifying the need for space to be made for nuanced conversations around religions and beliefs. Without making space to address these issues and topics as they arise, simplistic black-and-white narratives risked going unchallenged. Teachers in the case-study schools spoke of how recent terrorist attacks had provoked a great deal of discussion in class. A teacher, in a Catholic school, felt that he had to address this issue 'head-on'. The topic of discussion had been raised among the pupils themselves, with many pupils expressing 'sensationalist', and occasionally 'racist', views. The teacher felt that facilitating such discussion in class provided a platform through which the children could explore how religion might

be used as a proxy to justify heinous acts, thereby challenging stereotypes of a particular religion. Although such conversations may seem challenging or advanced for children at primary level, they reflect the exposure that young children have to the wider world. The desire to engage in such conversations was expressed by one group of children in the consultation who told us that they would like to learn more by ‘talk[ing] about it more often in groups’.

When addressing misconceptions of Islam, one Muslim parent noted the ubiquitous nature of the media: ‘Everyone is listening [to the] radio, internet...that is the problem’ (Parent, Catholic school). The issue of how religions are portrayed in the media, particularly in relation to Islam, was also cited by a teacher in the Community National School as an issue that could give rise to prejudice: ‘Too much in the media is too extreme’ (Teacher, Community National School). It seems that challenging questions about religions will arise in children’s worlds whether formally addressed in school or not. For certain respondents, ERB and Ethics was seen as providing a space for stereotyping to be challenged before it took hold.

Fostering the skills and dispositions that children need to navigate the complexities of contemporary life emerged strongly during the consultation. The importance of developing and fostering empathy, acceptance and respect appeared time and again in responses. Respect and the creation of respectful environments, in particular, were cited by participants in all case-study schools as being central to their work. Many of the hopes for ERB and Ethics related to the development of relational skills and dispositions by children, which can be seen to contribute to children’s social and emotional learning.

Schools of all types stressed the importance they placed on fostering respect within their settings. The principals in the case-study schools highlighted the central role that respect plays within the culture of the school community. The principal of the multi-denominational gaelscoil noted, ‘[Tá] meas ag chuide dhuine ar a chéile...meas an focail is mó atá ann’ (*Everybody has respect for each other...respect is the most important word*). (Principal, multi-denominational gaelscoil).

This was a sentiment echoed by the principal of a Catholic school who stated that the school was respectful on ‘every level’. These assertions were broadly borne out across the consultation and were reiterated by principals, teachers and parents. Respect was seen as providing the cornerstone of all positive and affirming encounters in the school space, with particular resonance in relation to religions, beliefs and ethical development. The potential for ERB and Ethics to contribute to this respectful environment was proposed.

We believe that the proposed curriculum will foster in children (and teachers alike) a respectful acceptance of the right to hold particular beliefs, attitudes and

worldviews. (Lecturers in Ethical and Intercultural Education, St. Patrick’s College, written submission)

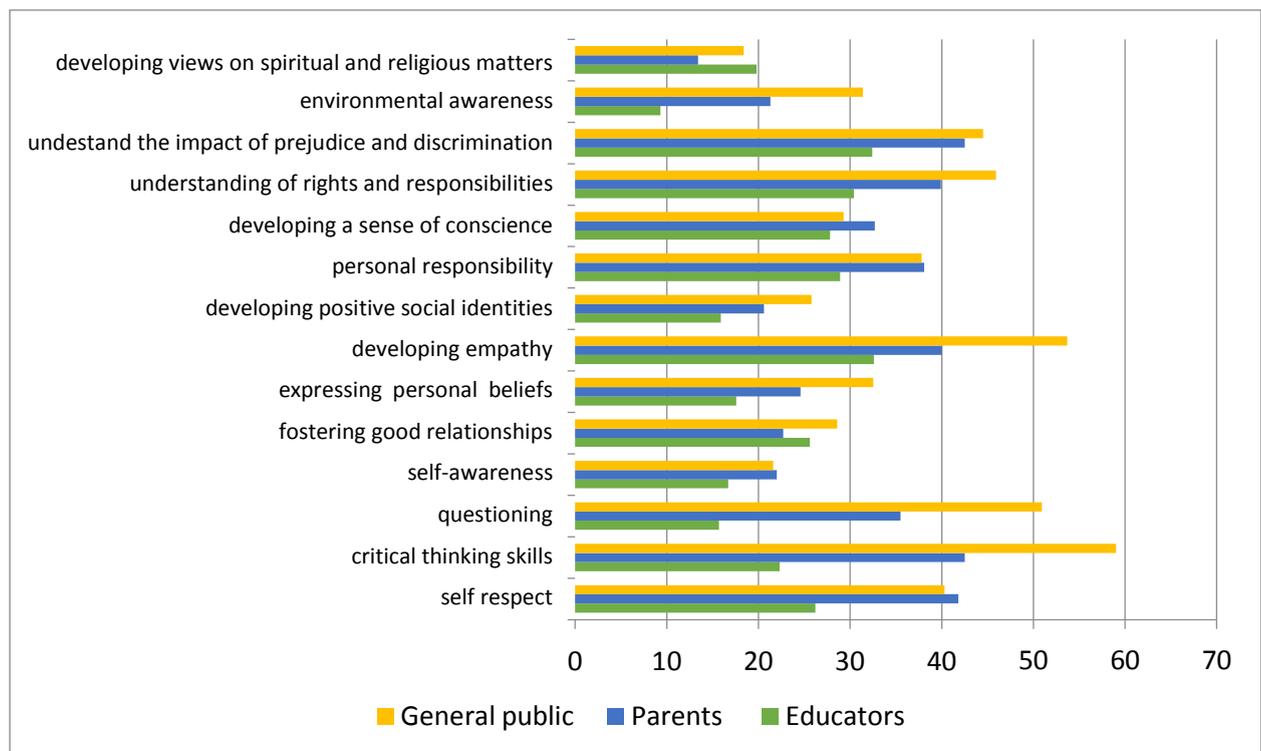
And indeed this emphasis on respect was reiterated by many of the children who participated in the consultation. It was a term that emerged repeatedly in their responses. One group noted that religions and beliefs were ‘important to us because almost everybody has belief and [they] need to be respected’.

The development of empathy was proposed across the consultation as a foundational for positive engagement. The significance of the development of empathy was reiterated across formats.

Although empathy may be touched on in SPHE, I feel it is not in the context of imaging someone else's cultural experience and fostering empathy and understanding of difference. Critical thinking certainly needs to be planned for more intentionally. (Educator, questionnaire)

Related to the development of empathy were ideas of acceptance, tolerance, openness and developing relationships. The above quote also highlighted the importance of developing critical thinking skills, a theme that emerged particularly strongly, along with questioning, in the online questionnaires. In the questionnaires, respondents were asked to choose what they considered to be the most important skills and dispositions for children to develop. The graph below provides the results.

Figure 4: Stakeholders’ views of appropriate skills and dispositions for the proposed curriculum



It became clear during the consultation that many of the skills and dispositions most commonly proposed by participants related strongly to fostering positive relationships and linked to areas of social and emotional learning. As Smyth has highlighted, relationships and engagement with school are both strongly related to children's self-image (2015, p. 35). As can be seen in Figure 4 above, parents and members of the general public were also likely to emphasise the importance of questioning and the development of critical thinking skills. In visits to case-study schools, a significant emphasis was placed on social and emotional learning as underpinning children's wellbeing and success in school. Indeed, across consultation formats, participants asserted time and again that a curriculum in ERB and Ethics has the potential to play a significant role in the fostering of the skills and dispositions required by children to live in a diverse, ever-changing world.

## Alignment with the primary school curriculum

It was clear from the consultation that participants felt ERB and Ethics had very clear links to aspects of the existing primary curriculum, as well as to *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and Junior Certificate religious education. Some of these connections include:

- Ethics as closely aligned with Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)
- ERB as closely aligned with elements of Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE)
- ERB and Ethics as closely aligned to the theme of Identity and belonging in Aistear
- ERB and Ethics as connecting to patrons' programmes
- ERB and Ethics as connecting to Junior Certificate religious education.

For some, the development of ERB and Ethics provided the opportunity to expand and enhance the existing SPHE curriculum. One teacher in an Educate Together school noted, 'SPHE is very dated and overloaded! It would be great if this provided an opportunity to look at it again and make it more visible and promote it more'.

SPHE was regularly highlighted as a significant and growing area of learning, particularly regarding social and emotional development of children, which in the view of teachers does not have adequate time or space within the curriculum. One participant at a discussion group suggested that the Ethics component should be incorporated into SPHE, a view that represented a significant theme of the feedback: 'Ireland has changed...SPHE programme needs to change but I do see it as part of SPHE' (Deputy principal, Catholic school).

The connection between the ERB component and other areas of the existing curriculum was perhaps not as straightforward for participants, with SESE being occasionally suggested: 'Diversity and other cultures comes into SESE' (Principal, Church of Ireland school).

Throughout the consultation, the potential for elements of ERB and Ethics to be integrated into existing subjects was raised. It may be that such responses also reflect, to some extent, a wariness from respondents and participants, particularly teachers and principals, of contributing to curriculum overload. However, a note of caution was also raised during the consultation, suggesting that if ERB and Ethics was not fore-fronted as a distinct curriculum area then it risked not being explicitly taught, merely being subsumed into other areas of the curriculum without meaningful change in teaching and learning.

I personally would caution against seeing ERB/Ethics as 'integrated' or 'cross curricular' content. If ERB/Ethics is developed as a curriculum there is far less chance it will be sidelined in the longer term in Irish school. (Lecturer in Philosophy of Education, St. Patrick's College, writtensubmission)

Although Aistear was not commonly explicitly referenced during the consultation, links to the theme of Identity and belonging could be seen in some of the feedback during the consultation. ERB and Ethics was proposed by some as potentially contributing to the development of an inclusive identity and fostering a sense of belonging.

I would hope that it would provide a framework through which they can understand religious belief. At present they experience it as an exclusive identity, them and us. A lack of understanding and inclusion in second class has certainly left my eldest child with an unwillingness to tolerate or understand any religious belief. (Parent questionnaire)

The seven school case-studies highlighted the work that schools do to ensure that all children feel a sense of belonging within the school community. They also highlighted each school's commitment to supporting the identity of each child. This was underlined in many written submissions from schools, teachers and principals. However, as can be seen from the quote above, some parents noted that this was not always the experience of the children.

A significant strand of feedback made links to existing patrons' programmes. For example, the recently developed Grow in Love programme for Catholic schools was perceived as containing clear links to ERB.

We would like to further clarify that education about other religions and beliefs is compatible with the ethos of a Catholic school. Education that helps to encourage respect, understanding and mutual tolerance is reflective of Catholic values and contributes, in part, to making the ethos a living reality. This is reflected in the new

Catholic Pre-School & Primary Religious Education Curriculum<sup>7</sup> for Ireland (herein referred to as the new curriculum) which makes provision for inter-religious literacy. (St. Senan's Education Office, Catholic Primary School Education Secretariat for the Archdiocese of Cashel & Emly & Dioceses of Kerry, Killaloe and Limerick, written submission)

Many from a multi-denominational background noted the similarities to the Learn Together programme in Educate Together schools and the Goodness Me, Goodness You! programme in Community National Schools.

The proposal to maintain the patron's or faith education programme alongside the ERBE curriculum is endorsed. However, given that GMGY already incorporates many of the approaches and much of the content of ERBE in its programme care needs to be taken to ensure that [no] unnecessary overlap or repetition is imposed on children who are following the GMGY and ERBE. (Community National Schools, written submission)

Regardless of what areas ERB and Ethics were seen to link to, this desire for integration or incorporation into existing curriculum areas was a common theme of the consultation across all formats. Some respondents from a denominational perspective suggested that minimum guidelines, perhaps in a similar vein to the guidelines for *Intercultural Education in Primary Schools* (2005), might be a more suitable approach, allowing schools to tailor any innovation to their own setting. In many responses, as the above quote highlights, a note of caution was also raised against unnecessary repetition or overlap with existing curriculum provision, something that was also highlighted in the ESRI report:

Again, many of the above aims are presently being achieved in SPHE programmes. World beliefs are included in the Church of Ireland Religious Education Programme. Respect is at the heart of every school. (Educator, questionnaire) (Darmody & Smyth, 2016, p. 51)

For many, there was recognition that links had to be made with the post-primary curriculum, in order to ensure continuity. For others, ERB and Ethics would need to be developed in a way that ensured that 'there can't be too much overlap there [with the junior cycle curriculum]...' (Deputy Principal, Catholic school). A minority within the consultation felt that learning related to religions and beliefs would best be catered for in the junior cycle curriculum altogether rather than in primary schools.

An important consideration emerged during the consultation in relation to the title of the proposed curriculum. This concern was strongly expressed during the school visits and in discussion groups with teachers. *Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics*, it was suggested, was associated with an adult-centric and academic understanding of the type of learning proposed by the curriculum rather

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<sup>7</sup>The new Grow in Love programme for Catholic schools is based on this document.

than promoting a child-centred approach. In particular, concern was expressed about the use of the word 'about' in the title. This word seems to indicate learning experiences that are removed from a child's experience in primary school. Such an approach seems to be at odds with an inquiry-based and experiential understanding of teaching and learning in primary school. Furthermore, a number of written submissions questioned whether ERB and Ethics was foisting an adult understanding of the world onto the lives of children. Indeed, the approaches to learning outlined in the proposals for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics would also seem at odds with the perceived approach indicated in the current title.

## Inclusive practices in schools

As noted earlier, all of the case-study schools and most of the school leaders and teachers who engaged in the consultation report asserted that they strive to create inclusive environments where all children flourish. The practices to support this inclusive environment fell into three broad categories:

- experiential learning
- fostering positive relationships
- informal learning<sup>8</sup>.

A significant aspect of the consultation focused on the emphasis schools already place on fostering a sense of belonging among children as well as supporting identity. Examples were provided by respondents, particularly during engagement with the case-study schools, of the types of learning and activities that occurred that supported positive environments. Some examples provided included:

- celebrating festivals of major religions
- intercultural weeks
- school visits to religious sites
- class visits by members of different communities
- assemblies

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<sup>8</sup> Informal learning refers to the type of learning that happens incidentally in schools. It is not part of the formal curriculum, but emerges as reaction to the learning needs of children as they arise.

- fostering positive relationships with parents
- class projects
- informal learning
- working towards a Yellow Flag<sup>9</sup>.

It became apparent during the engagement with case-study schools that such practice varied widely across schools. The multi-denominational schools in the study highlighted experiential activities such as trips to various religious sites and school visits by significant religious leaders from the community, as well as the teaching of formal lessons on religions and beliefs. This approach promoted 'a general openness to everyone else in the world', according to one parent in the Educate Together school, and drew on children's natural curiosity. There was a recognition that experiential learning may cater to how young children learn and contribute to better understanding:

It can be hard for children to learn about the peoples and the buildings in a discursive way...children need to experience it and encounter it to understand it. Youtube videos are ok but they are more for older children. Younger children need the experiential element. (Teacher, Educate Together school)

One multi-denominational school in the case-study research saw the opportunity to connect with the outside world through inviting members of the local community to the school to talk about their religions and beliefs. The school proposed this form of encounter and engagement as an appropriate approach for such learning. This practice emphasises experiential and inquiry-based approaches to this type of learning that is also evident in the proposal for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics.

The case-studies found that schools across all contexts engage in many practices that both support inclusive environments and relate to the proposals for ERB and Ethics. One example given, in a Catholic school, was the use of projects in upper-primary classes to help children to learn more about their diverse backgrounds. Children were given the opportunity to talk about their projects and these were displayed around the classroom. A parent in the school, who was of a different faith community to that of the school ethos, noted that her child was delighted to have the opportunity to present to the class on an important aspect of her life.

In another denominational school, Muslim children are encouraged to bring in prayer mats to pray if they wish to do so. This also provides children the opportunity to tell their classmates about their own religious practices. These examples demonstrate the initiatives taken by schools to serve the

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<sup>9</sup>The Yellow Flag Programme is an award scheme that recognises the work of schools in promoting diversity and inclusion.

educational and personal needs of their children in the absence of formal curriculum provision: 'We are now considering whether a prayer time for older Muslim pupils can be accommodated' (Teacher, Catholic school).

These practices were underlined in the CPSMA submission, which noted the extent to which Catholic schools strove to be inclusive environments:

[I]nter-cultural notice boards, the marking of major religious festivals of other faiths and in the level of respect and support that our teachers, staff and management strive to cultivate in our pupils for those of the same faith, other faiths and no faiths alike. (Catholic Primary Schools Management Association, written submission)

Indeed, emerging strongly in written submissions was the contention that Catholic schools already provide inclusive environments for diverse pupil populations and it was stated that the Grow in Love programme created space for inter-cultural and inter-religious learning. Similarly, the written submission by the Church of Ireland General Synod Board of Education reiterated the inclusive and diverse nature of schools under their patronage. It conducted a consultation with teachers in Church of Ireland schools. They noted that

... Church of Ireland schools have always been very inclusive in outlook and that they have traditionally had children of other faiths and none in their classrooms. Respect for those of other beliefs and none is part of most schools' ethos statements and is a key aim of the Follow Me programme. (The Church of Ireland General Synod Board of Education, written submission)

This emphasis on inclusion was also referenced by some of the children who took part in conversation. One group of children noted that 'we include everybody, different skin tones or different beliefs. We respect them in every way possible'.

During the case-study school visit, there was also a recognition that dialogue with parents was of central importance when dealing with areas that have significant meaning in people's lives:

We have non-Christian children taking part in Nativity plays and other Christian events, we make arrangements with parents and make sure it happens in a respectful way. (Teacher, Catholic school)

Across all school types the fostering of good relationships within the school community was perceived as key in providing these types of inclusive practice. The principal in the Church of Ireland school noted the importance of the school's positive relationship within the parish community. This allowed the school to develop a positive learning environment for all children, where they feel secure and develop a sense of belonging.

In schools like this, you are so aware of the background of the child. A lot of care is needed and relationships are key; from greeting the child in the morning; because

many of our children may have had bad mornings. And we are always communicating between the class teacher and support teacher. (Teacher, Catholic school)

There was also a recognition during the consultation that much of this work takes place informally, outside the formal curriculum: 'Incidental learning ...through assemblies for example' (Discussion group participant). Assemblies were noted on several occasions during the case-studies as a time which linked to themes from ERB and Ethics. Also, the emphasis on informal learning can be seen to reflect the dispositional nature of ERB and Ethics, as understood by participants in the consultation, particularly during the school visits and in the discussion groups.

For one teacher in a Church of Ireland school, news items often provided a platform for discussing challenging questions related to ERB and Ethics. The teacher stated that his class often watch children's news together and that this acted as a springboard for conversation on topical questions. This allowed for questions of diversity, human rights and justice to be explored in the safe environment of the classroom.

While there was evidence of school practices relating to areas of learning that an ERB and Ethics curriculum may address, there was significant variation in such practices. Significantly even within a single school, from classroom to classroom a variation in inclusive practices was evident. In some schools they used the patron's time to undertake such practices, although these practices were not directly related to the teaching of the programme developed by the patron. For others such practices occurred outside of curriculum time and were almost described as extra-curricular activities that seemed to have developed locally over many years.

## Role of the teacher

It was apparent during the consultation that the development of ERB and Ethics has implications for the role of the teacher. Three sub-themes emerged in relation to this:

- the required content knowledge
- the required pedagogical skills for mediating the curriculum
- challenges for teachers in denominational schools.

In the course of the consultation the questions of teacher education and competency to teach the subject matter of the ERB component, in particular, were raised. Some teachers pointed to the potential for a reduced sense of a teacher's self-efficacy, since they have not taught such subject matter previously. The point was also made that teachers may not be comfortable teaching ERB and

Ethics as they may not have the fundamental understanding of world religions themselves in order to teach the content knowledge appropriately: 'Teachers could feel inadequate' (Discussion group participant).

There was a feeling among teachers that they would need to have a greater understanding of other religions and beliefs to fulfil the aims of the proposed curriculum. The fear of misrepresentation of religions and beliefs emerged as a concern. However, there was also a recognition that the curriculum is not only about teacher's knowledge but also children's experience.

Teachers might not feel comfortable teaching without knowing everything about what others believe. But I think it has to be about the child and what they believe in, because religion is an experience not just about knowledge. (Teacher, Catholic school)

The above response highlights the unique nature of ERB and Ethics, which is bound up with people's values and practices, that contribute greatly to their shared sense of identity and belonging. The sensitive nature of the subject matter may be challenging for teachers to facilitate successfully in a safe environment. The fear that 'some are so strong [in their beliefs]' may lead to an 'I'm right and you are wrong' scenario which might be difficult to mediate for teachers (Member of board of management, Catholic school). There was uncertainty among teachers as how to handle sensitive conversations. Some called for clarity in regards to the curriculum, with teachers needing to have clear expectations of what is involved. Teachers called for clarity as to how this would look in the classroom and to how prescriptive the curriculum would be. This also reflected a degree of uncertainty among participants as to what was contained in the proposals: 'How standardised would the programme be? Expectations need to be clear' (Discussion group participant).

There was an acknowledgement that the teaching of ERB and Ethics would require specific skills on the part of the teacher. These skills were seen to be primarily linked to the teacher's relationship with their class: 'Most important, do they have a good relationship with the children? Do they have respect for the children?' (Principal, Educate Togetherschool).

The centrality of positive relationships across the school community in the promotion of the aims and values proposed for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics was a key strand that ran through the consultation. Many teachers acknowledged that they will need to be aware of their biases and maintain a sense of 'neutrality': 'Teachers need to be neutral' (Discussion group participant).

The concept of neutrality, although not proposed in the consultation materials, nonetheless was highlighted as presenting a challenge for teachers. The proposals recognised that no teaching is value-free, but rather what is called for is an objective teaching of religions, beliefs and ethics; nonetheless

the question of what this would mean for teachers working in denominational schools was raised during the consultation.

The need for sensitivity with regard to the way language is used when discussing religions and beliefs was highlighted. This anxiety around language was expressed by the principal of the Community National School who noted: 'When we started we were very nervous about how we were saying things... [we were] conscious of language' (Principal, Community National School). She added, however, that with experience and good communication with parents this disappeared over time. Yet this concern represented a common thread in the consultation:

Teachers' dialogue and vocabulary around religions and beliefs is so important. We have to be so careful in how we do this. I would feel very uncomfortable doing this now without CPD. (Teacher, Catholic school)

The quotation above encapsulates a recurring theme from teacher responses, a need for continuing professional development (CPD), particularly given the sensitive nature of the curriculum. Teachers who participated in the consultation questioned their ability to implement such a curriculum without this specific support. It is interesting to note that Educate Together carried out a survey to gain the views of teachers to inform their submission to the consultation and found that teachers did not report any difficulty teaching the belief systems strand of the Learn Together programme due to personal convictions:

Some concern has been expressed about the role of the teacher in the delivery of this curriculum. In our experience teachers, as professionals, are capable of setting aside personal beliefs and convictions when exploring world religions. This has been borne out by the results of a survey of teachers in our sector in relation to the ERB and Ethics curriculum. (Educate Together, written submission)

However, the Association of Trustees of Catholic Schools suggests that there may be significant challenges for teachers who have chosen to work in denominational schools:

For teachers, that have taken a job in a denominational school because of its Ethos it will be a direct attack on their reason for teaching in a denominational school. You cannot have a lived 'reality of faith' in December but in January it is suddenly up to the young pupils to 'co-learn' with their teachers as 'co-learners' and implicitly decide for themselves. (Association of Trustees of Catholic Schools, written submission)

While the view expressed above reflects a very real tension that may arise in denominational primary schools, it was also highlighted by others through consultation that the same could be said of any sensitive matter that arises in a denominational school that may be seen as challenging the ethos of these schools, such as sexual identity and relationships. Although the point raised by the Association of Trustees of Catholic Schools was also present in teacher questionnaires, it was very much a minority

perspective in these responses. Overall, with the exception of written submissions from individual organisations, it was not a position that emerged prominently during consultation.

## Age appropriateness of ERB and Ethics

Some contributions expressed concerns about the age-appropriateness of the teaching and learning approaches proposed for ERB and Ethics. Furthermore, for some, the content of an ERB course was seen as particularly sensitive for younger children.

Some participants were concerned that the curriculum content would be developed in a way that reflected adult considerations rather than being relevant or appropriate for the child's stage of development. One respondent to the questionnaires expressed this reservation noting in relation to the proposed strands:

The above strands are all appropriate providing that they are covered in an appropriate way, with due regard for the developmental capabilities of young children and their right to have, in so far as is possible, a carefree childhood. We must be careful not to force children into an adult's world or overburden them with issues that are largely the concern of and of relevance to adults. We are dealing with 4-12 year olds, not young adults. (Educator, questionnaire)

This view emerged particularly in the questionnaires. There was also an awareness that the type of learning appropriate for children at the senior end of primary school might not necessarily be appropriate for children at the junior end.

This proposal suggests that the teaching of ERBE commence at Infant Level. HOW can a child of 4/5 years of age engage in the critical analysis of another faith whilst learning of their own faith? (Teacher, written submission)

The above response highlights the need to ensure that the type of learning envisaged in the ERB component is relevant and appropriate for the child's stage of development. It also reflects a questioning of whether the ERB component should take place in the junior classes. Furthermore, some contributions expressed a concern that ERB could be confusing for young children, particularly for those in denominational education who were being nurtured in a particular faith. There was also concern among a small minority from a secular perspective that discussions around religions and beliefs were inappropriate and confusing for very young children. However, the counter-perspective was also in strong evidence during the consultation.

Such a curriculum should be introduced in the junior end of primary education and continue throughout primary education in a spiral fashion. Research has shown that children of this age and stage are capable of engaging with global issues and issues of inequality and fairness. Thus, it is more logical to introduce such a subject

before certain prejudices and stereotypes may have taken hold. (Global Schools: Primary Education for a Just World, written submission)

The potential for the curriculum to nurture dispositions around contesting prejudice and stereotyping was a view that received strong support across all consultation formats.

Despite the above reservations particularly in regards to the ERB component many of the children who participated in the consultation expressed an interest and curiosity in learning about different religions and beliefs. According to a child in a denominational school, 'I would like to learn about all religions and beliefs so we know what others in the world are like'.

The particular nature of ERB and Ethics requires that the curriculum be developed with the sensitivities above borne in mind, in a way that is enabling and engaging for the child but appropriate to their stage of development.

## What the learning might look like: children's perspectives

An important aspect of the NCCA's consultation and curriculum development processes involves engagement with children on issues that concern their learning. As the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics is breaking new ground in the primary education system in Ireland, it is therefore salient to listen to children and their views on how ERB and Ethics might look in classrooms. Such a process is not just a recognition of the rights of children to have their voice heard, but an acknowledgement of the centrality of the child's voice in a child-centred education.

In the course of the school visits during the case-study research, children shared their thoughts on how the concepts in ERB and Ethics related to their lives and the types of learning they wished to engage with around this subject matter. Stimulus material relating to the values that underpin the proposals for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics were developed with the aim of prompting the interest of children. Following a related activity, information was gathered through semi-structured discussions with children from fourth, fifth and sixth classes. Children were encouraged to discuss ideas and concepts from the proposals, linked to questions of identity and rights, and were asked how they would like to learn more about these. After discussion in groups, children highlighted a range of suggestions and ideas. The ideas and suggestions described fall broadly into five categories.

Many children suggested talk-based or dialogical approaches such as discussions and debates. Primarily, these were based on interaction with each other in which children learn from each other:

- 'Talk more about everyone's experience to do with these subjects.'
- 'A group discussion.'

- 'Talk about it more often in groups.'
- 'Through acting and debates.'

Children also suggested learning about the ideas of ERB and Ethics in inquiry-based or project-type activities.

- 'Do projects on different places of worship in other religions.'
- 'Read books on the subject.'
- 'Maybe more projects or presentations.'
- 'Research on other beliefs in their places of worship.'
- 'Make a poster about other religions with facts.'
- 'Make video clips of people talking about their religion.'

There were also proposals that such learning could be mediated through arts based activities and through creative forms.

- 'Drama, music or art that includes the subject.'
- 'Make a game.'
- 'Make an app about religion so you can play and learn more.'

Indeed, learning through the use of ICT methods was mentioned on numerous occasions.

- 'Watching videos about different religions and beliefs and learn about what people think by going to places and meeting new people.'
- 'Using computers or I pads to learn more about people who have fought for justice and learn about other people's culture.'

Experiential modes of learning arose very strongly in feedback from many of the children's groups.

- 'Visit places of worship of other beliefs.'
- 'Identity: By socialising with other people apart from your friends and family. By not beating around the bush and being direct with people...'
- 'Belonging: There should be a student council and children could vote for the president, vice-president etc. All children will be allowed to vote as they are all part of our association.'

- ‘People with different religions could talk about what they do and how they practice their religion.’
- ‘Meeting religions leaders (sic).’
- ‘Experience an hour without respects, right(s), justice and see how you are after.’
- ‘...Go on trips out to places and visiting speakers could come...’
- ‘Belonging: Letting everyone get included not living (sic) them out playing with new kids letting them feel that they belong their (sic) and not feel bad.’

As the above quotation highlights children often expressed a desire to engage in activities that were inclusive in nature. However, one group succinctly encapsulated much of the sentiment expressed among the children.

- ‘Keep the lessons fun.’

Undoubtedly, many of the comments and suggestions reflect practices that the children are already familiar with and enjoy.

The study *Religious Education in Multicultural Societies* (REMC) (Smyth et al., 2013) also collected information from primary school children in relation to their identity and beliefs. The study shows that while a strong link exists between the views of parents and their children, children’s views could differ from those of their parents and, even where they defined themselves as sharing their parents’ beliefs, they adopted a personalised approach to belief. The study also shows that children tended to enjoy classes that focused on religious and moral education, regardless of the particular form it took, because they liked the content, especially the ‘stories’, and more interactive methodology used. These findings remind us of the agency children have in developing their own ideas and beliefs; as well as their natural curiosity to understand more about their friends, classmates and other members of their community.

The useful contributions by children to the consultation process indicate the types of teaching and learning children enjoy engaging with in this area of learning. As experts in their learning experiences, these views from children are very valuable, and will continue to inform the development of the curriculum towards appropriate learning experiences for children.



# Directions for ERB and Ethics

The consultation lasted for five months and attempted to be as far ranging as possible, providing opportunities for interested groups/individuals, schools, parents and the general public to participate. As with all NCCA consultations it strived to be open, transparent and engaging particularly since the development of this type of curriculum breaks new ground in Irish primary education. The findings of the consultation presented as themes in the previous section describe the diversity of opinion prevalent throughout the consultation process. This section of the report draws on the previous, providing a set of directions for the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics.

## Structured, coherent and incremental

The developmental appropriateness of a curriculum for ERB and Ethics is an important consideration, and one that was highlighted throughout the consultation. How children learn changes over time, cognitively, socially and emotionally. As such, teaching and learning looks quite different in the junior and senior classes of the primary school. Regardless of age, however, religions, beliefs and ethics have a considerable impact upon the lives of children. Child-centred learning also needs to be age-appropriate. In light of what teachers have told us, it would seem pertinent that whatever is developed to support learning experiences relating to ERB and Ethics, clarity is needed on what learning is appropriate for children at each stage of development. With this in mind, it would seem appropriate to link such learning to the experiences of children, particularly in the junior end of primary school, providing learning experiences that enable them to come to a deeper understanding of their sense of who they are and their contribution to the world in which they live. As highlighted by respondents to the consultation, this approach to learning is closely aligned with the Aistear theme of Identity and belonging, as well as Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) in the Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999).

The consultation also highlighted inclusive practices in schools in the areas of religions, beliefs and ethics. Many of these have been developed locally by schools to meet the needs of their communities and to ensure the promotion of the child's identity and belonging. While the quality and impact of such initiatives may differ from school to school, it is evident that there is an appetite to reflect and support the diversity of school communities. With the exception of *Intercultural Education in the Primary School: Guidelines for Schools* (NCCA, 2005), the primary curriculum currently provides little support to schools in this area of children's learning and development.

The incorporation of the types of learning promoted by ERB and Ethics would address this gap by ensuring the primary school curriculum supports structured, coherent and incremental learning for all primary school children in these areas. From the consultation, teachers and schools have described how ERB can create a space to enable constructive encounter and engagement about religions and beliefs, fostering respect and understanding while supporting the child's sense of identity and belonging. While Ethics can contribute to the promotion of a collective commitment to the dignity and freedom of all human beings, the importance of human rights and responsibilities, the place of justice within society, and the service of the common good. While support for this type of learning was evident, given the newness of ERB and Ethics as part of the primary curriculum, many teachers have called for a structured and coherent approach, a CPD programme and the development of support material for aspects of this type of teaching and learning.

## Experiential and inquiry-based

As in the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999) and *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009), ERB and Ethics as presented in the proposals for consultation recognises the child's ability to actively engage in and shape the educational process in partnership with the adult. They also acknowledge that children often pose challenging questions and are encouraged to explore these in age-appropriate ways. While the concept of inquiry-based education is a strong feature in Irish education, this is not to say it is uncontested. During the consultation process some contributions from a denominational perspective raised questions as to the appropriateness of inquiry-based approaches to teaching about religions, beliefs and ethics in primary schools. For some denominational patrons, the inquiry-based approach to education 'conflicts with the concept of a child learning from within their own tradition or community...' (Education Secretariat of the Dublin Diocese, writtensubmission).

Contrary to this view, feedback from children during the school case-study research demonstrated a desire to engage with the concepts of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics in an experiential and inquiry-based way. Suggestions such as games, collaborative learning, discussion, projects, visitors and class field trips link not only to the work that happens in schools already, but to *how* children like to learn. The contributions from children are also a recognition that their voices, experiences and perspectives are essential to the construction of their education (Lundy & Cook-Sather, 2015). Time and again during the case-studies teachers reiterated the centrality of the child's experience in promoting positive engagement in the classroom. They asserted that giving children the opportunity to speak about their own lives and making space for them to talk about what is important to them provides children with a sense of ownership and inclusion within school. It would seem appropriate then that

teaching and learning relating to ERB and Ethics would recognise the richness of each child's experience shaped by a unique combination of factors which include, among others, family dynamics, relationships, cultural norms, societal expectations and religious customs. Such learning will encourage children's natural curiosity about the world in which they live and help them to develop in an age-appropriate way the skills to engage critically and empathically with their communities and beyond. As a child experiences teaching and learning through an inquiry-based and experiential approach, supported by ERB and Ethics, they will encounter a balance between the development of dispositions and skills such as religious literacy and citizenship and the cognitive understanding of the histories, geographies and content knowledge of religions and belief systems.

## Development of skills and dispositions

What emerges from the consultation is that any curriculum for ERB and Ethics will have to balance the provision of knowledge 'about' religions, beliefs and ethics with the development of skills and dispositions to enable children to live in and contribute to a diverse world. The teaching of ERB and Ethics has the potential to create a shared space for children to encounter and engage with religions, beliefs and ethical considerations, in an age-appropriate manner. During the school case-study research, teachers described how ERB can provide children with the opportunity to express the beliefs, traditions and practices that are important to them, while also developing the skills to listen and engage constructively with others. While Ethics can foster the skills and dispositions required for children's ethical development—for example, empathy, reflection, self-awareness and mutual understanding among others—complementing much of the work that already takes place in schools and across the curriculum. It has been noted that primary schools are uniquely suited to developing the civic dispositions for democratic society (Waldron, 2004; White, 1999). With such an approach, teachers play a critical role in nurturing key dispositions. We know that dispositions are not taught in the formal sense of instruction, children develop these through rich and generative interactions and relationships with teachers, adults and their peers. This focus on skills and dispositions as well as knowledge and understanding enables children to develop the agency necessary to navigate the complexities of contemporary life.

## The role of the teacher

During the consultation, teachers described the opportunities that arise to support children in their development when teaching aspects of ERB and Ethics. In parallel with this, they also identified potential challenges in teaching this part of a primary curriculum noting a particular apprehension

regarding the subject matter. In a child-centred approach to education, teachers play a key role in planning, facilitating and assessing children's learning. In ERB and Ethics, this work may focus on the promotion of tolerance and acceptance, nurturing respect, fostering dialogue and inviting the child to engage with the educational process. Though teachers' knowledge of religions, beliefs and ethics remains important, interactive teaching and learning methodologies and strategies such as discussion, debate, research, group work, projectwork, drama and collaborative learning play a prominent role.

There was a feeling among teachers participating in the consultation that they would need to have a greater understanding of other religions and beliefs to fulfil the aims of the proposed curriculum. The fear of misrepresentation of religions and beliefs emerged as a concern. Equally, the need for teachers to question and evaluate their own values and beliefs through reflecting on questions such as, 'What learning experiences are we providing for children?, What do we really understand by the term child-centredness? And does such a curriculum serve the interest of the child?' (Ang, 2015). It has been proposed that child-centred education and pedagogy be viewed in a relational context with both the teacher and the child at the centre (Ang, 2015). This relational basis strongly reflects how teachers and schools have characterised their roles in classrooms throughout the consultation. Relational pedagogy is seen in Irish primary classrooms on a daily basis across all aspects of the curriculum and is central in fostering positive relationships between teachers and children. This approach seems especially relevant when providing learning experiences related to ERB and Ethics.

Teachers who participated in the consultation questioned their ability to implement such a curriculum without specific training. There is no doubt that the types of teaching and learning associated with ERB and Ethics provides teachers with some new aspects to their practice. With such a change teachers need to be central in the change process and provided with adequate continuing professional development to enhance their professional capabilities and to ensure meaningful change in classrooms.

## Responsive and compatible

The consultation document proposed a curriculum in ERB and Ethics for all children in the state. Bearing in mind that this is a new area of learning at primary level, the development of ERB and Ethics needs to be undertaken in a way that is responsive to the current contexts and needs of school communities, while also being compatible with the particular structure of patronage of Irish primary schools.

Time pressures and curriculum overload were highlighted in this consultation and previous NCCA consultations as potential barriers to curriculum change. While *curriculum overload* is often used to

refer to the increased pressure of working in schools, often factors external to the curriculum itself exacerbate the feeling of overload, such as ‘meetings with parents, extra-curricular activities, sacramental preparation, testing, documenting incidents and teaching in multi-grade classes’ (INTO, 2015, p. 21). Nonetheless, the feeling of an overloaded school day is a prevalent feature of primary education, with teachers expressing that there is ‘insufficient time to implement fully all curriculum subjects or to cover all the objectives within each subject’ (NCCA, 2008, p. 196).

As part of the *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020* (DES, 2011), the NCCA have been tasked with providing advice on time across the primary school curriculum. In working towards providing this advice, the NCCA is currently developing a set of proposals on the structure of the primary curriculum and how time is allocated across it. This work provides an opportunity to rethink how curriculum is organised from the infant classes to senior classes.

As the structure of the primary curriculum continues to be reviewed and redeveloped, opportunities for the introduction and incorporation of teaching and learning relating to ERB and Ethics may present themselves in newly-developed curriculum areas and/or subjects. For instance, both Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Social Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE) have strong connections with the proposed content of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics. Aligning the development of ERB and Ethics with the redevelopment of the primary curriculum will ensure that the types of teaching and learning that received broad support in the consultation become a feature of primary education while not adding to the sense of curriculum overload currently experienced by teachers. This is explored further under the section ‘Aligned with developments at primary and post-primary’ below.

The consultation also raised many issues and concerns regarding our education system that are outside the remit of curriculum development and yet have a significant impact on the implementation of the curriculum in primary schools. One such issue is the role of the patron in the provision of curriculum under the Education Act (1998). As outlined in written submissions, the Act establishes the rights of the school patron to ‘promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students and provide health education for them, in consultation with their parents, having regard to the characteristic spirit of the school’ (15) (2)(b). Section 15(2)(b) further requires a board of management to:

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... (Government of Ireland, 1998)

In this legislative context, a tension can arise between what the State describes as appropriate provision for primary school children and what is taught in different types of schools. Based on the written submissions to the consultation, it is clear that for some patrons at least, the proposals represented a challenge to their role in respect of schools under their patronage. While some submissions from a denominational perspective welcomed the proposals, suggesting that challenges and difficulties may be overcome, others were definitive, stating that ERB and Ethics as described in the proposals was not compatible with their vision for schools under their auspices.

The balance between appropriate state provision, consistent with the rights of all children, and the right of the patron to uphold the ethos of their schools is an important consideration. In legislation, as detailed above, patrons have the right and duty to mediate the entire primary school curriculum with regard for the ethos of their schools. For most of the primary curriculum, it could be argued that this presents little challenge. However, when it relates directly to a child's sense of identity and belonging, particularly in relation to their religion, beliefs and ethics, which may not always coincide with those of the patron body, what has been envisaged by a state curriculum for all may transact differently in a given school context.

Thus a curriculum in ERB and Ethics as described by the *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector* (Coolahan et al., 2012) and as outlined by the NCCA in the proposals for consultation, may be limited by systemic features of Irish education. These features described above, include Irish legislation in relation to the duties of the school patron, the denominational structure of the Irish primary school system, and the experience of curriculum overload in primary classrooms.

While acknowledging the potential limiting factors within Irish education to the incorporation of a stand-alone curriculum in ERB and Ethics, there was nonetheless considerable support for the types of teaching and learning that were described by the proposals. And so while the development of a *curriculum* in ERB and Ethics may pose particular challenges for the Irish context, there is nonetheless an appetite within the system for the incorporation of age-appropriate opportunities for children to engage in the study of religions, belief systems and ethical decision-making, to receive specific support in developing the dispositions to live in diverse communities, and for the teaching and learning experiences described by the proposals for consultation. It would seem that in order for such learning to become a feature of primary education a different approach to curriculum development may need to be adopted to mitigate the potential limiting factors in the system. Such an approach is considered in more detail below.

## Aligned with developments at primary and post-primary

In recent years, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has contributed to a number of significant milestones in the development of Irish primary education. The development of *Aistear* (2009), the new integrated *Primary Language Curriculum* (2015) and the current work on the mathematics curriculum are some of these key milestones. However, of particular significance for the development of ERB and Ethics is the NCCA's work on formulating advice to the Minister for Education and Skills on time allocation and the structure of the primary curriculum.

Time constraints emerged strongly during the consultation, and in previous consultations, as a significant barrier to meaningful curriculum change in primary schools. Closely allied to the question of time is that of curriculum overload, again a common theme in consultations with teachers. In light of this, the NCCA is revisiting the structure of primary education which may provide opportunities to rethink how the curriculum is organised and presented for primary schools. This work on the wider curriculum will further assist in identifying where and how the types of learning associated with ERB and Ethics can be located and articulated.

Currently, the NCCA is considering an incremental stage approach to curriculum from junior infants to sixth class. In this approach, the themes of *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) could feature or help shape the structure of the curriculum in the junior years of primary thereby supporting continuity of experience and progression in learning as children transition from pre-school into primary school. As a child progresses through primary school and develops the cognitive capacity to distinguish between different forms of knowledge, the curriculum structure too may evolve leading to a more subject based approach in the senior years of primary linking with the subject structure used in the new junior cycle. An incremental stage-approach to curriculum design could better reflect children's different and changing developmental stages during primary education impacting on how, when and what they learn in primary school. As the primary curriculum continues to be reviewed and redeveloped, this work could enable the introduction and incorporation of learning experiences relating to ERB and Ethics within and across a reconceptualised primary school curriculum.

Given this potential restructuring of the primary curriculum, the question arises as to where the learning experiences described by the proposals for ERB and Ethics might be located. As highlighted throughout the consultation process, the types of experiential and inquiry-based learning relating to ERB and Ethics are closely aligned to those found in the theme of Identity and belonging<sup>10</sup> in *Aistear*

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<sup>10</sup> The four aims of the theme Identity and belonging include:

(NCCA, 2009) and in elements of Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE).

The possible inclusion of the theme of Identity and belonging in the curriculum presents opportunities to describe learning experiences, particularly those relating to the development of a dispositional nature and that relate to ERB and Ethics within this theme, in the junior end of primary school. As with all teaching and learning in the early years of primary school, such experiences need to be age-appropriate, beginning with children's own experiences before branching out to the experiences of others. As children grow and develop in their own understanding of who they are, by the senior end of primary school their cognitive development will enable them to learn about other religions and beliefs in their classroom and communities. Such learning could be aligned with the type of learning described in SESE. Again with a restructuring of the primary curriculum, it may be opportune to look at aspects of history and geography, in particular, to incorporate some of the content knowledge relating to ERB, while the component of Ethics may be closely aligned with a reconceptualised SPHE curriculum area in the senior end of primary.

To support continuity and progression of children's learning during the transition from primary to post-primary school, it becomes clear that the provision for ERB and Ethics in primary needs to connect with learning experiences in junior cycle. The introduction of Wellbeing programmes has particular points of connection with the learning experiences associated with ERB and Ethics. By providing programmes that include short courses such as Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Wellbeing is enhanced as it is embedded in the curriculum and visible to teachers, students and parents. Concepts such as rights and responsibilities, human dignity, development, democracy and stewardship found in CSPE may have connections to types of ethical learning developed for primary schools. Modules such as Belonging and integrating, Friendship and influences and Decisions in the junior cycle SPHE specification may also make connections to the child's development as an ethical being. It would seem likely that links could also be made with a reviewed and redeveloped religious education specification for junior cycle in the coming years.

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-Children will have strong self-identities and will feel respected and affirmed as unique individuals with their own life stories.

-Children will have a sense of group identity where links with their family and community are acknowledged and extended.

-Children will be able to express their rights and show an understanding and regard for the identity, rights and views of others.

-Children will see themselves as capable learners.

Incorporating learning experiences associated with ERB and Ethics within and across areas of a newly presented primary school curriculum would give all children the opportunities to engage with ERB and Ethics, although not in the same way the *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector* (Coolahan et al., 2012) seemed to envisage. As described earlier, the legislation pertaining to the duties of the patron body, combined with the structure of the school patronage system and the reality of curriculum overload in primary classrooms, present substantial obstacles to the inclusion of an additional ERB and Ethics *curriculum* or *subject* into the current primary curriculum. To make meaningful and sustained change in classrooms, an integrated approach to curriculum development, as outlined above, will support the types of teaching and learning related to ERB and Ethics that have received broad support during consultation.

# Concluding remarks

The question of what children should learn in school is rarely straightforward. Given that this is a new area of development, this is especially true in the case of ERB and Ethics. The process of consultation in this context has been particularly important. Consultation can often be a challenging process and gives rise to questions regarding the values we hold dear in our education system. Nonetheless, it is always an enlightening process that exercises opinion, invites collaboration and contributes to a shared understanding of matters. This particular consultation was successful in gathering views from a diversity of voices to ensure a variety of perspectives were represented.

The consultation brought to light many issues and systemic features that, while external to the development of curriculum and beyond the remit of the NCCA, have a significant impact on curriculum implementation in primary schools. The legislation underpinning our education system is one such feature. The Education Act (1998), while recognising the rights of the patron body, has the unintended effect of limiting what is achievable through a state curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics. This challenge arises not from the patron bodies which have a legislative right to teach the primary curriculum in accordance with the ethos of their schools, but rather by the structure of the primary school system which is predominantly faith-based. The provision of Sections 9(d), 15(2)(b) and 30(2)(b), among others, are potential barriers to the type of 'objective, critical and pluralist' approaches advocated in the proposals for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics. The debate, relating to the tension between what the state describes as appropriate learning for children and the reality of what transacts in classrooms across school types is ongoing.

What emerges from the consultation is a need for responsive provision of the types of learning experience relating to ERB and Ethics that recognise the current pressures on schools in meeting the needs of their communities, while remaining compatible with the variety of school types in Ireland. Schools, when sharing examples of inclusive practice called for structured, coherent and incremental learning for all primary school children while also providing time and space during the school day to support the inclusive practices described by ERB and Ethics. Children described experiential and inquiry-based learning opportunities, calling for learning that relates to their experience and natural curiosity. For parents, the development of children's skills and dispositions in relation to social justice, human rights, equality, empathy and the impacts of discrimination and prejudice was seen as an important feature of learning relating to ERB and Ethics.

Time constraints and curriculum overload have emerged as strong considerations during the consultation. To address these concerns and others that have arisen in recent years, the NCCA is revisiting the structure of the primary curriculum, providing an opportunity to rethink its physical face. As the thinking on the structure of the primary school curriculum develops, the question of time allocation across curriculum areas also becomes significant. If a more incremental stage-approach to curriculum design is followed, opportunities arise to incorporate the types of teaching and learning described by ERB and Ethics into existing curriculum areas such as Identity and belonging (Aistear), SPHE and SESE arise. This approach not only addresses the issue of curriculum overload but also the concerns raised around the adult-centric nature of the title of the proposed curriculum in *Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics*, which seems at odds with the types of teaching and learning proposed in the consultation documents. It seems desirable then that work on ERB and Ethics progresses in line with the broader developments in early childhood, primary and post-primary education.

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# Appendix A: Teacher and third-level educator questionnaire

## 1. Introduction and details

Welcome to our online questionnaire. The aim of the questionnaire is to gather the views of educators on the proposed approaches and content for a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics. The questionnaire draws directly on the proposals of the Consultation Paper which is available to [download here](#).

An important part of a child's education involves learning about and understanding the lives, values and traditions of friends, classmates and members of the wider community. Much of this learning already takes place in Irish classrooms where a child's sense of their own identity and belonging is nurtured and valued. To ensure that every child has the opportunity for such learning and to ensure that the good practices which already take place in schools are recognised, we are now developing a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics.

Here are some key points you may like to consider before completing the questionnaire:

-ERB and Ethics is for all children in primary schools.

-The curriculum aims to enable children to understand the cultural heritage of the major belief traditions which have been embraced by communities; while also enabling children to develop a personal commitment to the dignity and freedom of all human beings.

-The curriculum is separate to, but may complement, the patron programme of the school such as the *Alive-O* programme in Catholic schools and the *Learn Together* curriculum in Educate Together schools.

We recognise the constraints of time allocation for the introduction of a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics into primary schools. These will be considered as the curriculum is being developed. In the meantime we request that you respond to the proposals for the development of the curriculum as outlined in the consultation material.

Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts. We value your feedback.

\* 1. I am responding as a

Primary teacher (including principals)

Early childhood professional

Student teacher

Post-primary teacher

Third-level educator

Other (please specify)

[Questions 2, 3 and 4 apply to teachers only.](#)

2. What position do you hold in your school?

Other (please specify)

3. I have the following number of years experience in teaching

4. What type of school do you teach in?

Other (please specify)

## 2. Aims and strands

The general aims of the proposed curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics support those of the '99 Primary School Curriculum, the Aistear Framework and the Intercultural Education Guidelines.

### 5. Aims

The proposed aims for the curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics are listed below.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that these are appropriate for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
ERB and Ethics should enable children to develop self-awareness, confidence, personal beliefs and positive social identities.	<input type="radio"/>				
ERB and Ethics should enable children to have a knowledge and understanding of how religions and belief traditions have contributed to the culture in which we live.	<input type="radio"/>				
ERB and Ethics should enable children to express comfort, empathy and joy with human diversity.	<input type="radio"/>				
ERB and Ethics should enable children to form deep, caring human connections.	<input type="radio"/>				
ERB and Ethics should enable children to understand the relationship between rights and responsibilities.	<input type="radio"/>				
ERB and Ethics should enable children to appreciate the impact of prejudice and discrimination.	<input type="radio"/>				

6. Are there other aims that you would like to see included in ERB and Ethics?

7. Are there any of the above aims that you would not like to see included in ERB and Ethics? Please state why.

**8. Strands**

The five strands or areas proposed for the curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics are *Personal understanding*, *Mutual understanding*, *Spiritual awareness*, *Character education* and *Connection to the wider world*. To read more about the content of each strand download our [Consultation Paper here](#).

To what extent do you agree or disagree that these are appropriate strands for inclusion in a curriculum for ERB and Ethics:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Don't Know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Personal understanding	<input type="radio"/>				
Mutual understanding	<input type="radio"/>				
Spiritual awareness	<input type="radio"/>				
Character education	<input type="radio"/>				
Connection to the wider world	<input type="radio"/>				

9. What other strands would you like to teach in ERB and Ethics?

10. Are there any of the above strands that you would not like to be included? Please state why.

### 3. Skills and dispositions

Knowledge and understanding of religions, beliefs and ethics are important elements of a quality education which fosters democratic citizenship, nurtures mutual respect, enhances religious freedom and promotes an understanding of diversity. Such education is happening across the curriculum in primary schools. This section of the questionnaire looks at the features of the curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics.

#### 11. Skills and dispositions

While acknowledging that many of these skills and dispositions are developed across the curriculum in primary schools, which of those listed below do you feel are most appropriate for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics? Please select up to five.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Self-respect                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Developing positive social identities                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Critical thinking skills     | <input type="checkbox"/> Personal responsibility                               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Questioning                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Developing a sense of conscience                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Self-awareness               | <input type="checkbox"/> Understanding of rights and responsibilities          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fostering good relationships | <input type="checkbox"/> Understand the impact of prejudice and discrimination |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Expressing personal beliefs  | <input type="checkbox"/> Environmental awareness                               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Developing empathy           | <input type="checkbox"/> Developing views on spiritual and religious matters   |

12. Considering your response to question 11 above, are the skills and dispositions you selected being developed in other areas of the current primary school curriculum? If so, please state in which areas in particular.

13. Are there any skills or dispositions that you would like to see added to this list in question 11?

#### 4. What could Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics look like?

**Much of the teaching and learning that takes place in primary schools is child-centred which recognises the child's ability to actively engage in and shape the educational process in partnership with the adult. The proposed curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics intends to support this approach to teaching and learning.**

##### 14. Methodologies and strategies

In our Consultation Paper we have suggested a range of methodologies and strategies that may be used in the teaching of ERB and Ethics. Please select up to five that you feel are most relevant.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Whole-class discussion                   | <input type="checkbox"/> Games   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Debates                                  | <input type="checkbox"/> External visits                                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Small group work                         | <input type="checkbox"/> Links with local community organisations/groups |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Circle time                              | <input type="checkbox"/> Practical projects                              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pair work                                | <input type="checkbox"/> Visual arts                                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Drama: role play, etc.                   | <input type="checkbox"/> Media analysis                                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Assemblies                               | <input type="checkbox"/> Connecting with parents and the community       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Integrated/cross-curricular projects     | <input type="checkbox"/> Play  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Thinking time (Philosophy with children) |  |

15. Considering your response to question 14 above, are the methodologies and strategies you selected supported in other curriculum areas? If so please state which areas in particular.

16. Are there any other methodologies and strategies you feel are relevant to a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics?

17. Considering your responses to the previous questions about skills, dispositions, methodologies and strategies, what areas of education do you feel a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics can contribute to?

## 5. Opportunities and challenges

The development of a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics is being developed as part of the wider developments in the primary sector. Other developments include the development of a language curriculum, a mathematics curriculum and the development of a new Primary Curriculum Framework/Structure.

The question then of what this curriculum will look like becoming important. Will ERB and Ethics be a curriculum area, similar to Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE), with subjects relating to ERB and Ethics under its umbrella? Will ERB and Ethics be under the umbrella of another curriculum area, perhaps called 'Wellbeing' or 'Identity and belonging', with other subjects such as Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) contributing to the curriculum area? Will ERB and Ethics be two separate subjects, with two rationales, two sets of aims and two sets of learning outcomes? Or will ERB and Ethics be a framework, like Aistear or Junior Cycle, setting out broad learning outcomes within which schools have flexibility in mediating the curriculum? The answers to these significant questions will be informed by the consultation and will guide the work of the development group for the proposed curriculum.

The NCCA also recognises the constraints on time allocation for the introduction of a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics to the primary school curriculum. However the development of a new Primary Curriculum Framework may provide opportunities for the placement of ERB and Ethics within the primary school curriculum. Keeping this in mind, please respond to the questions below.

18. In your opinion what opportunities does the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics provide?

19. In your opinion what challenges does the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics provide? Can you suggest solutions to these challenges?

# Appendix B: Parent and guardian questionnaire

## Introduction

Welcome to our online questionnaire for parents and guardians. The aim of this questionnaire is to gather the views of parents and guardians on the proposals for a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics. The questionnaire draws on the proposals of the NCCA Consultation Paper which can be [downloaded here](#).

An important part of your child's education involves learning about the lives, values and traditions of friends, classmates and members of the wider community. Much of this learning already takes place in our classrooms. To ensure that every child has the opportunity for such learning and to ensure that the good practices which already take place in schools are recognised, we are now developing a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics.

Here are some key points you may like to consider before completing the questionnaire:

- ERB and Ethics is for all children in primary schools.
- The curriculum aims to enable children to understand the cultural heritage of the major belief traditions which have been embraced by communities; while also enabling children to develop a personal commitment to the dignity and freedom of all human beings.
- The curriculum is separate to, but may complement, the patron programme of the school such as the *Alive-O* programme in Catholic schools and the *Learn Together* curriculum in Educate Together schools.

If you have more questions you may find answers in the [Consultation Paper](#) here.

Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts. We value your feedback.

1. What type of school does your child/children attend? (Tick more than one box if necessary)

- Catholic School
- Church of Ireland School
- Educate Together
- Community National School
- Other (please specify)

2. What class is your child/children in? (Tick more than one box if necessary)

- Junior infants
- Senior infants
- First class
- Second class
- Third class
- Fourth class
- Fifth class
- Sixth class

## Aims and ideas

In Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics, children will learn about the lives, values and traditions of friends, classmates and members of the wider community. Children will also learn about the dignity and freedom of all human beings. To what extent would you agree or disagree that the following statements reflect appropriate aims and ideas for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics:

3. I would like my child to develop self-awareness, confidence, their personal beliefs and positive identities.

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>				

4. I would like my child to have knowledge and understanding of how religions and beliefs have contributed to the culture in which we live.

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>				

5. I would like my child to express empathy and joy with human diversity and form deep, caring human connections.

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>				

6. I would like my child to understand more about themselves and how they relate to others.

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>				

7. I would like my child to understand the relationship between rights and responsibilities.

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>				

8. I would like my child to recognise unfairness, injustice and the impact of discrimination.

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>				

9. It is important for my child to form positive relationships with children of different cultural, religious and non-religious backgrounds.

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>				

10. My child should be comfortable sharing his/her ideas about religions and beliefs in a respectful school environment.

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>				

11. My child's curiosity about different religions and beliefs should be encouraged throughout their education in primary school.

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>				

12. The classroom should be a place where my child's beliefs and values are respected.

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>				

13. ERB and Ethics will help your child develop certain skills, some of which are already developed in other subjects. Which of the skills listed below do you feel are most appropriate for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics? Please select five.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Self-respect                          | <input type="checkbox"/> Understanding of rights and responsibilities             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Developing positive social identities | <input type="checkbox"/> Fostering good relationships                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Critical thinking skills              | <input type="checkbox"/> Understanding the impact of prejudice and discrimination |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Personal responsibility               | <input type="checkbox"/> Expressing personal beliefs                              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Questioning                           | <input type="checkbox"/> Environmental awareness                                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Developing a sense of conscience      | <input type="checkbox"/> Developing empathy                                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Self-awareness                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Developing views on spiritual and religious matters      |

14. In what way would you like a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics to contribute to the life of your child?

# Appendix C: Members of the general public questionnaire

## Introduction

Welcome to our online questionnaire for the general public. The aim of this questionnaire is to gather the views of interested individuals and organisations on the proposals for a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics. The questionnaire draws on the proposals of the NCCA Consultation Paper which can be [downloaded here](#).

An important part of children's education involves learning about the lives, values and traditions of friends, classmates and members of the wider community. Much of this learning already takes place in our classrooms. To ensure that every child has the opportunity for such learning and to ensure that the good practices which already take place in schools are recognised, we are now developing a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics.

Here are some key points you may like to consider before completing the questionnaire:

-ERB and Ethics is for all children in primary schools.

-The curriculum aims to enable children to understand the cultural heritage of the major belief traditions which have been embraced by communities; while also enabling children to develop a personal commitment to the dignity and freedom of all human beings.

-The curriculum is separate to, but may complement, the patron programme of the school such as the *Alive-O* programme in Catholic schools and the *Learn Together* curriculum in Educate Together schools.

If you have more questions you may find answers in the [Consultation Paper here](#).

Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts. We value your feedback.

## Aims and ideas

In Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics, children will learn about the lives, values and traditions of friends, classmates and members of the wider community. Children will also learn about the dignity and freedom of all human beings.

To what extent would you agree or disagree that the following statements reflect appropriate aims and ideas for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics:

1. Children should learn to develop self-awareness, confidence, their personal beliefs and positive identities.

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>				

2. Children should have knowledge and understanding of how religions and beliefs have contributed to the culture in which we live.

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>				

3. Children should learn to express empathy and joy with human diversity and form deep, caring human connections.

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>				

4. Children should learn to understand more about themselves and how they relate to others.

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>				

5. Children should learn about the relationship between rights and responsibilities.

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>				

6. Children should learn to recognise unfairness, injustice and the impact of discrimination.

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>				

7. Children should learn how to form positive relationships with children of different cultural, religious and non-religious backgrounds.

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>				

8. Children should be comfortable sharing their ideas about religions and beliefs in a respectful school environment.

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>				

9. Children's curiosity about different religions and beliefs should be encouraged throughout their education in primary school.

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>				

10. The classroom should be a place where children's beliefs and values are respected.

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<input type="radio"/>				

11. ERB and Ethics will help children develop certain skills, some of which are already developed in other subjects. Which of the skills listed below do you feel are most appropriate for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics? Select up to five.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Self-respect                          | <input type="checkbox"/> Understanding rights and responsibilities                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Developing positive social identities | <input type="checkbox"/> Fostering good relationships                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Critical thinking skills              | <input type="checkbox"/> Understanding the impact of prejudice and discrimination |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Personal responsibility               | <input type="checkbox"/> Expressing personal beliefs                              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Questioning                           | <input type="checkbox"/> Environmental awareness                                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Developing a sense of conscience      | <input type="checkbox"/> Developing empathy                                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Self-awareness                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Developing views on spiritual and religious matters      |

12. In what way would you like a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics to contribute to the lives of children?

## Appendix D: Children's feedback sheet

# Education about RELIGIONS & BELIEFS & ETHICS

**1. What do these words that you talked about have to do with your life? Are they important to you? Why?**

**2. How would you like to learn more about these ideas?**

## Appendix E: Written submissions

No.	Title	Name	Date	Position	Personal/Organisation
1	Faith Formation: The Role of Home, Parish and School	Aidan Hart	29/03/2016	Retired Inspector Northern Ireland	Personal
2	Submission ERB and Ethics	Aine O'Connell	30/03/2016	Primary teacher	Personal
3	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Alice O'Connor, Bernadette O'Connor	19/03/2016	Parent and grandparent	Personal
4	Submission ERB and Ethics	Alma Leonard, Majella McCarthy, Thelma Gileran, Colum Hammond, Barry Tierney	11/03/2016	Primary school principals	Personal
5	Ceisteanna agus Moltaí an Fhorais Pátrúnachta	An Forás Pátrúnachta	15/03/2016	Patron body	Organisation
6	Submission ERB and Ethics	Ann Moran	26/01/2016	Primary teacher	Personal
7	Response to the Consultation Paper on Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics	Anne Cunningham	22/03/2016	Member of board of management Middleton CBS Primary School	Personal
8	Submission ERB and Ethics	Anne Hession	07/03/2016	Lecturer in Religious Education, St Patrick's College, Drumcondra	Personal
9	Submission ERB and Ethics	Scoil Mhuire Lourdes	30/03/2016	Principal	Organisation

10	Submission ERB and Ethics	Anne Marie Kavanagh, Niamh McGuirk	31/03/2016	Lecturers in Ethical and Intercultural Education	Personal
11	Submission ERB and Ethics	Anne O'Brien	25/03/2016	Retired primary teacher	Personal
12	Submission ERB and Ethics	Anonymous	16/03/2016	Teacher and parent	Personal
13	Association of Trustees of Catholic Schools (ACTS) Submission to the NCCA ERB and Ethics Consultation Process	Association of Trustees of Catholic Schools	29/03/2016		Organisation
14	Catholic Ethos Schools will not Objectively Teach New ERBE course — 2nd Submission to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment on Proposed New Course	Atheist Ireland	23/03/2016		Organisation
15	Submission ERB and Ethics	Ballinasloe & District Council Knights of St. Columbanus	31/03/2016		Organisation
16	Submission ERB and Ethics	Bishop Alphonsus Cullinan	24/03/2016	Bishop (RC)	Organisation
17	Response to NCCA consultation on ERB and Ethics	Bishop Denis Nulty	22/03/2016	Bishop (RC)	Organisation
18	Comment on NCCA Consultation Paper on Education about Religions, Beliefs and Ethics.	Breandán Ó Bric	30/03/2016		Personal

19	Submission ERB and Ethics	Breda Holmes, Helen Leacy, Sr Maureen Matthews SP	16/03/2016	Education Secretariat Archdiocese of Dublin	Personal
20	Submission ERB and Ethics	Brian Caball	31/03/2016		Personal
21	Submission ERB and Ethics	Brigid Bennet, Collette Hyland, Mairead Johnston	11/03/2016	Primary school principals	Personal
22	Submission ERB and Ethics	Callystown NS	19/04/2016	Board of management	Organisation
23	Response to ERB and Ethics Consultation	Carmel Magee	30/03/2016	Primary teacher	Personal
24	Submission ERB and Ethics	Carmel Magner	01/04/2016		Personal
25	Submission ERB and Ethics	Caroline Tully	07/03/2016	Principal	Personal
26	Submission on Behalf of the Catholic Primary Schools Management Association	Catholic Primary Schools Management Association	30/03/2016	Patron body	Organisation
27	Response to ERB and Ethics Consultation	Cathy Burke	31/04/2016	Principal	Personal
28	Submission ERB and Ethics	Cecelia Gavigan	00/02/2016		Personal
29	Response to ERB and Ethics Consultation	Celine Lynch	16/03/2016	Teacher	Personal
30	Submission ERB and Ethics	Church Of Ireland General Synod Board of Education	11/08/2016	Patron body	Organisation

31	Response to ERB and Ethics Consultation	Ciaran Burke	31/03/2016	Primary teacher	Personal
32	Submission ERB and Ethics	Claire (Surname not provided)	29/02/2016	Diocesan advisor	Personal
33	Submission ERB and Ethics	Clare O'Callaghan	30/03/2016	Primary teacher	Personal
34	Submission ERB and Ethics	Clooneyquinn NS	10/05/2016	Board of management	Organisation
35	Submission ERB and Ethics	Cloontagh NS	24/03/2016	Board of management	Organisation
36	Response to ERB and Ethics Consultation	Colette Savage	27/01/2016	Self-employed	Personal
37	Submission ERB and Ethics	Colin J.A. O'Brien	16/03/2016		Personal
38	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Commission for Education and Formation of the Irish Episcopal Conference	30/03/2016		Organisation
39	Response from the Community National Schools Management Group (CMG) to the Consultation Paper on ERB and Ethics (ERBE)	Community National School Management Groups	03/03/2016		Organisation
40	Response to ERB and Ethics Consultation	David Bracken, Maebh Enright	01/04/2016	Parents	Personal
41	Response to ERB and Ethics Consultation	Deirdre Fahey	22/03/2016	Board of management member Midleton CBS Primary School	Personal

42	Submission ERB and Ethics	Derry Diocesan Catechetical Centre	30/03/2016	Diocesan advisor: primary schools	Organisation
43	Submission ERB and Ethics	Desmond Sutton, Anne Buggy, Enda Hickey	14/03/2016	Principals	Personal
44	Response to ERB and Ethics Consultation	Diocese of Elephin	26/03/2016	Education secretariat representative	Organisation
45	Submission ERB and Ethics	Dr Barbara O'Toole	11/03/2016	Senior lecturer in Education, Marino Institute of Education	Personal
46	Response to ERB and Ethics Consultation	Dr Daniel O'Connell	30/03/2016	Lecturer in Religious Education, Mary Immaculate Limerick	Personal
47	Response to ERB and Ethics Consultation	Dr Dermot A Lane PP	31/03/2016	Parish Priest	Personal
48	Submission ERB and Ethics	Dr Eugene Duffy	10/03/2016	Lecturer in Theology and Religious Studies M.I Limerick	Personal
49	Submission ERB and Ethics	Dromindoora NS	15/04/2016	Board of management	Organisation
50	Submission ERB and Ethics	Dublin Diocese Education Secretariat	31/03/2016	Education secretariat	Organisation
51	Submission ERB and Ethics	Éamonn Mac Localainn	30/03/2016	Retired teacher	Personal
52	Submission ERB and Ethics	Éanna Johnson Phd	30/03/2016		Personal
53	Response to ERB and Ethics Consultation	Education Secretariat for the Archdioceses of Cashel & Emily and Dioceses of Kerry	31/03/2016	Education secretariat	Organisation
54	Submission ERB and Ethics	Elizabeth Byrt	30/03/2016	Parent	Personal
55	Submission ERB and Ethics	Enda Burke	30/03/2016	Parent/Second-level teacher	Personal

56	Submission ERB and Ethics	EQUATE	20/05/2016		Organisation
57	Submission ERB and Ethics	Fr Brendan Kyne	22/03/2016	Parish Priest /Board of management (Castleconnell NS Lisnogry NS Ahane NS St Vincents NS)	Unclear
58	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Fr Daniel Reynolds LC	30/03/2016	Priest Legionaries of Christ	Personal
59	Submission ERB and Ethics	Fr Francis Nolan	31/03/2016	Priest	Personal
60	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Fr Gerard Kenny	30/03/2016	Priest /Board of management member	Personal
61	Response to ERB and Ethics Consultation	Fr Jim Kileen	22/03/2016	Board of management member Midleton CBS Primary School	Personal
62	Submission ERB and Ethics	Fr John Bane	30/03/2016	Board of management Broadford and Kilbane NS	Personal
63	Submission ERB and Ethics	Fr John O'Keefe	08/03/2016	Parish Priest	Personal
64	Submission ERB and Ethics	Fr Malachy Conlon	03/02/2016	Education Sec. Archdiocese of Armagh	Personal
65	Submission ERB and Ethics	Fr Michael Kennedy	30/03/2016	Priest and diocesan advisor	Personal
66	Submission ERB and Ethics	Frank Harrington	30/03/2016		Personal
67	Submission ERB and Ethics	Frank Murphy	30/03/2016		Personal
68	Submission ERB and Ethics	Gillian Crowley	16/11/2015	Principal Dromore NS	Personal
69	Submission to NCCAr ERB & Ethics from	Global Citizenship School	22/03/2016		Organisation

	Global Citizenship School				
70	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Global Schools: Primary Education for a Just World	20/03/2016		Organisation
71	Submission ERB and Ethics	Gwen O'Connell	30/03/2016	Parent	Personal
72	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Helen Leacy	31/03/2016		Personal
73	Submission ERB and Ethics	Holy Family G.N.S	29/03/2016	Principal	Organisation
74	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Holy Family Junior Primary School	11/03/2016	Board of management	Organisation
75	Submission to the NCCA: ERB and Ethics	INTO	11/04/2016		Organisation
76	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Irish Centre for Religious Education (ICRE)	31/03/2016		Organisation
77	Submission ERB and Ethics	James Walsh	12/01/2016	Parent	Personal
78	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Jim and Breda Holmes	31/03/2016	Parents	Personal
79	Submission ERB and Ethics	Jim O'Connell	08/03/2016	Holy Family Parish Administrator	Personal
80	Submission ERB and Ethics	Jim Boyle	29/03/2016		Personal
81	Submission ERB and Ethics	Joan King	22/02/2016	Principal Creevagh NS	Organisation
82	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Joan Whelan	25/01/2016	Principal R.M.D.S. Educate Together NS	Personal
83	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Joe Humphreys	05/01/2016	Journalist/author	Personal

84	Submission ERB and Ethics	Joe Searson	04/03/2016	Chairperson of board of management Quilty NS	Personal
85	Submission ERB and Ethics	John and Margaret Mallon	30/03/2016	Parents	Personal
86	Submission ERB and Ethics	John Clogan	23/03/2016	Parent and grandparent	Personal
87	ERB and Ethics Consultation	John Murphy	22/03/2016	Board of management member Midleton CBS Primary School	Personal
88	Submission ERB and Ethics	John (surname unclear)	05/04/2016		Personal
89	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Jones Irwin	30/03/2016	Lecturer in Philpsophy of Education in St. Patricks College, Project Officer GMGY	Personal
90	Submission ERB and Ethics	Joseph Woulfe	30/03/2016		Personal
91	Submission ERB and Ethics	Josephine Ryan	22/03/2016	Parent	Personal
92	Submission ERB and Ethics	Kathleen O'Dowd	30/03/2016	NAPDA member	Personal
93	Submission on ERB and Ethics Module	Kieran Allen	23/03/2016	Education Equality member	Personal
94	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Kilkishen NS	31/03/2016	Principal and board of management	Organisation
95	Submission ERB and Ethics	Kilmagner NS	01/06/2016	Board of management	Organisation
96	Submission ERB and Ethics	Kilmore Diocesan Education Office	25/03/2016		Organisation
97	Submission ERB and Ethics	Laurence Cassells	30/03/2016	Retired teacher	Personal
98	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Linda O'Shea	24/03/2016	Board of management member Midleton CBS Primary School	Personal

99	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Linda Kinch	15/03/2016	Student teacher	Personal
100	Submission ERB and Ethics	M O'Sullivan	04/11/2015		Personal
101	Submission ERB and Ethics	Maeve Mahon	31/03/2016	Diocesan advisor	Personal
102	Submission ERB and Ethics	Maire Corrigan	31/03/2016		Personal
103	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Maire Fitzgerald	31/03/2013	Teacher	Personal
104	Submission ERB and Ethics	Maire Sheehy, Eamonn Power	30/03/2016	Teachers	Personal
105	Submission ERB and Ethics	Mairead Harman	31/03/2016		Personal
106	Submission ERB and Ethics	Margaret Buckley	30/03/2016		Personal
107	Submission ERB and Ethics	Sr Maria Comerford	04/03/2016	Coordinator Primary School Diocesan Advisors, Diocese of Ossory	Organisation
108	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Maria McSwiney	03/03/2016	Principal teacher	Personal
109	Submission ERB and Ethics	Marie Porter	31/03/2016	Parent	Personal
110	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Martina Mallen	31/03/2016	Teaching principal	Personal
111	Submission ERB and Ethics	Mary Ann Collins	30/03/2016	Teacher	Personal
112	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Mary Cosgrove	20/05/2016		Personal
113	Submission ERB and Ethics	Mary Whelan	30/03/2016		Personal

114	Submission ERB and Ethics	Maureen Hamilton	30/03/2016	Parent	Personal
115	Submission ERB and Ethics	Maureen Matthews	20/05/2016	Teacher	Personal
116	Submission ERB and Ethics	Michael Quinn	31/03/2016	Parent	Personal
117	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Midleton CBS Primary School	31/03/2016	Board of management	Organisation
118	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Midleton CBS Primary School	31/03/2016	Principal teacher	Organisation
119	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Miriam O'Sullivan Long	30/03/2016	Teacher	Personal
120	Submission ERB and Ethics	Moyasta NS	16/03/2016	Board of management	Organisation
121	Submission ERB and Ethics	Naomi McCormick	16/03/2016	Teacher	Personal
122	Re: Consultation on Proposals for a Curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics	Ombudsman for Children	27/05/2016		Organisation
123	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Our Lady of Mercy Senior Primary School	21/03/2016	Board of management	Organisation
124	Submission ERB and Ethics	Owen Keogh, Jim Hannon	30/03/2016	Teachers and members of boards of management	Personal
125	Submission ERB and Ethics	Páraic Mac Lochlainn	31/03/2016		Personal
126	Submission ERB and Ethics	Patricia & John McGonagle	31/03/2016	Parents	Personal
127	Submission ERB and Ethics	Patrician Primary School Newbridge	30/03/2016	Board of management	Organisation

128	Submission ERB and Ethics	Patrick Griffin	31/03/2016	Parent	Personal
129	Submission ERB and Ethics	Patrick J. McCabe	31/03/2016		Personal
130	Submission ERB and Ethics	PJ Bracken	10/11/2015	Retired teacher	Personal
131	Submission ERB and Ethics	Regina Lydon	30/03/2016	Retired principal	Personal
132	Submission ERB and Ethics	Rev Christopher Hayden PhD STL	30/03/2016	Chairperson of two boards of management	Personal
133	Submission ERB and Ethics	Rev Prof Eamon Conway, Dr Kerry Greer, Dr John Murray, Dr. Rik Van Nieuwenhove, Anne Hession, Dr Thomas Finegan	22/03/2016	Third-level educators	Personal
134	Submission ERB and Ethics	Rev Thomas O'Byrne	20/05/2016	Priest and former member of board of management	Personal
135	Submission ERB and Ethics	Rose Burke	21/03/2016	Teacher	Personal
136	Submission ERB and Ethics	Sacred Heart NS Monaleen	11/03/2016	Board of management	Organisation
137	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Scoil Bhríde, Athgarvan	01/04/2016	Principal, board of management	Organisation
138	Submission ERB and Ethics	Scoil Bhríde, Midleton	20/05/2016	Board of management	Organisation
139	Submission ERB and Ethics	Scoil Mhuire Lourdes, Tullow	30/03/2016	Principal	Organisation
140	Submission ERB and Ethics	Scoil Mhuire Senior Primary School, Newbridge	24/03/2016	Board of management	Organisation
141	Submission ERB and Ethics	Scoil Mhuire Sóisearach Newbridge	29/03/2016	Board of management	Organisation
142	Submission ERB and Ethics	Scoil Mhuire, Birr	29/03/2016	Board of management	Organisation

143	Submission ERB and Ethics	Scoil na Naomh Uiligh	23/03/2016	Board of management	Organisation
144	Submission ERB and Ethics	Scoil Náisiúnta Muire gan Smál	16/03/2016	Board of management	Organisation
145	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Seán Corkery	21/03/2016	Diocesan advisor, Diocese of Cloyne	Organisation
146	Submission ERB and Ethics	Seán Ó Loingsigh	19/03/2016		Personal
147	Secular Schools Ireland LTD (SSI) Submission to NCCA	Secular Schools Ireland Ltd	31/03/2016		Organisation
148	Submission ERB and Ethics	Sharon Delaney	30/03/2016	Parent	Personal
149	Submission ERB and Ethics	Simon Lewis	30/03/2016	Editor of Anseo.net	Personal
150	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Sinéad McMahon	31/03/2016	Teacher	Personal
151	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Sonia Murray	30/03/2016	Teacher	Personal
152	ERB and Ethics Consultation	SPHE Network	31/03/2016	Third-level educators	Organisation
153	Submission ERB and Ethics	Spiritan Education Trust Board	30/03/2016	Patron of three schools	Organisation
154	Submission ERB and Ethics	St Anne's Special School	29/03/2016	Board of management	Organisation
155	Submission ERB and Ethics	St Conleth & Mary's Primary School	29/03/2016	Board of management	Organisation
156	Submission ERB and Ethics	St Bride's NS	30/03/2016	School staff	Personal
157	Submission ERB and Ethics	St John's NS, Kenmare	31/03/2016	Board of management	Organisation

158	Submission ERB and Ethics	St Mary's Convent Primary School	10/03/2016	Principal, and chairperson of the ethos committee	Organisation
159	Submission ERB and Ethics	St Michael's NS (Parents), Newtown (x13)	30/03/2016	Parents	Personal
160	Submission ERB and Ethics	St Michael's NS, Newtown	30/03/2016	Principal	Organisation
161	Submission ERB and Ethics	St Michael's NS, Newtown	30/03/2016	Chairperson board of management	Organisation
162	Submission ERB and Ethics	St Mochuo's Rathcoffey	31/03/2016	Board of management	Organisation
163	ERB and Ethics Consultation	St Oliver Plunkett NS, Ballina	30/03/2016	Board of management	Organisation
164	Submission ERB and Ethics	St Peter's NS	07/03/2016	Board of management	Organisation
165	Submission ERB and Ethics	St Vincent's GNS	20/03/2016	Board of management	Organisation
166	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Teresa McQuillan	28/03/2016	Grandmother	Personal
167	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Terry Leddy, Sr Anna Smith	16/03/2016	Retired teachers and diocesan advisors	Personal
168	Submission to NCCA Education in Religion and Beliefs and Ethics	The Humanist Association	30/03/2016		Organisation
169	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Tomás Ó hÓistín, John Phelan, Timothy Kelly	27/03/2016	Parent and board of management members	Personal
170	Submission ERB and Ethics	Tony Kealy	12/02/2016	Parent	Personal
171	ERB and Ethics Consultation	Trócaire	30/03/2016		Organisation
172	Submission ERB and Ethics	Una Mallowney	30/11/2015	Mother and grandmother	Personal
173	Reflection on ERB	Una Purcell	20/05/2016		Personal

174	Submission ERB and Ethics	Whitegate NS Midleton	30/03/2016	Board of management	Organisation
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# Appendix F: Key messages from background research underpinning the proposals

A curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics is a new development for the Irish context. Although much has been written in relation to the role of religious education and the patrons' programmes, understandably little research has been conducted on the development of an ERB and Ethics curriculum. As a first step in drawing up proposals for ERB and Ethics, three pieces of desk research were undertaken to inform and support the curriculum plans.

The research looked at national and international provision for ERB and Ethics as well as examining the role and contribution of the child to the curriculum. These reports make up the suite of background materials informing the development of the curriculum. A brief description of each report along with some significant findings are outlined below<sup>11</sup>.

## Encountering Children in a Curriculum for Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics: An Educational and Child's Rights Perspective

This paper supports the reader to understand the contribution children can make to a curriculum in ERB and Ethics. It does this by examining our evolving notions of children and childhood. The evolution of children's rights legislation is mapped out and a commentary is provided on the representation of children in this legislation. The paper builds upon and extends the ideas from a child's right perspective, to focusing on our understanding of the child from an educational perspective.

The key messages from this paper include:

A curriculum for ERB and Ethics should encapsulate the five aims of education as outlined in Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Two of the three studies were conducted by the NCCA. In the summaries provided, the text relating to the NCCA papers was taken directly from each study. Equally, the text in the summary of the international audit was taken directly from the National Foundation of Educational Research work, apart from the italicised text, which has been included by the NCCA for the purposes of this report.

<sup>12</sup> The five aims of education as outlined in Article 29 are as follows:

The child is viewed as a *capable, confident, curious* and *caring* individual who actively participates and contributes to their culture and education.

A socio-cultural approach, taking into account the key role of interactions and relationships, is a feature of effective ERB and Ethics teaching.

The child's ability to actively engage in and shape the educational process, in partnership with the adult, encourages a sense of identity with and belonging to their families, their schools and their communities; as active participants in these spaces.

Children have the ability to learn from religions and beliefs through *participating in culture*, shared talk and shared activities. Through these processes the child comes to a deeper understanding of themselves, their world and their place and role in it.

Some considerations for schools with the introduction of a curriculum for ERB and Ethics are highlighted in the final section of this paper. The areas examined include *school setting and ethos, teacher development, the patron's programme, children who opt-out of the patron's programme* and *intercultural education*.

The considerations for schools largely relate to the development of inclusive school communities. Inclusive school communities are characterised by learning environments that reflect and show pride in the language, ethnic, cultural and religious diversity that characterise our school communities. As such, they provide a support for the positive self-image of all children irrespective of their ethnicity, culture or religion; as well as reinforcing the normality of diversity for all children.

- 
- The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.
  - The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations.
  - The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own.
  - The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin.
  - The development of respect for the natural environment.

# National Foundation of Educational Research: Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics in Primary Education

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) audit outlines the provision of Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics across jurisdictions<sup>13</sup> to inform the development of a curriculum in Ireland.

*The key messages for the provision of Education about Religions and Beliefs are as follows:*

Generally, there is a national curriculum that is mediated locally by teachers and schools. This involves developing an enabling framework within which schools have the autonomy to mediate and negotiate the curriculum at local level, in line with the needs of their schoolcommunity.

Common principles for ERB curricula include: freedom of religion; fostering pupils' awareness of and respect for diversity; encouraging mutual understanding between peoples; Christian heritage; living in a pluralist society.

Education about Religions and Beliefs generally begins with the prevalent religion of the society in which it is being taught and is then widened to include a range of worldviews.

A spiral approach to curriculum design is a common feature across jurisdictions. This may involve creating strand and strand units or elements that stretch across developmental stages of education, enabling the child to connect at a deeper level as they engage with the concepts of curriculum.

Québec<sup>14</sup>, Queensland and New Zealand<sup>15</sup> are examples of jurisdictions that have taken significant steps in the development of ERB curricula and may have useful learning for the NCCA.

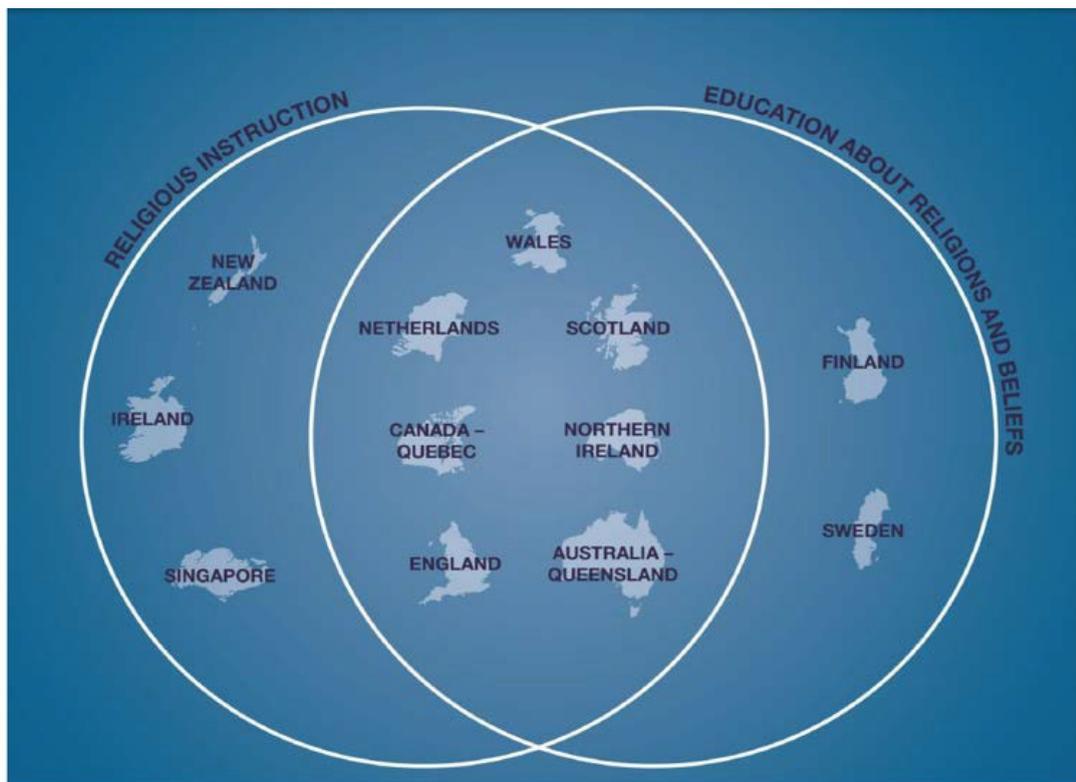
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<sup>13</sup> Jurisdictions included in the study: Australia, Queensland, New Zealand, Canada, Québec, Northern Ireland, England, Scotland, Finland, Singapore, France, Sweden, Ireland, USA – Massachusetts, Netherlands and Wales.

<sup>14</sup> Québec has recently completed the process of shifting from an essentially denominational Catholic and Protestant structure of religious education to a 'lay' structure, with the introduction of their 'Ethics and Religious Culture' programme.

<sup>15</sup> Both Queensland and New Zealand have provided the space for both ERB and denominational religious education in their national curriculum frameworks. Queensland allow up to 40 hours annually for denominational religious education, while New Zealand allow up to 20 hours annually. Ireland allocates 92.5 hours annually to the teaching of the patron's programme.

## International approaches to religious education

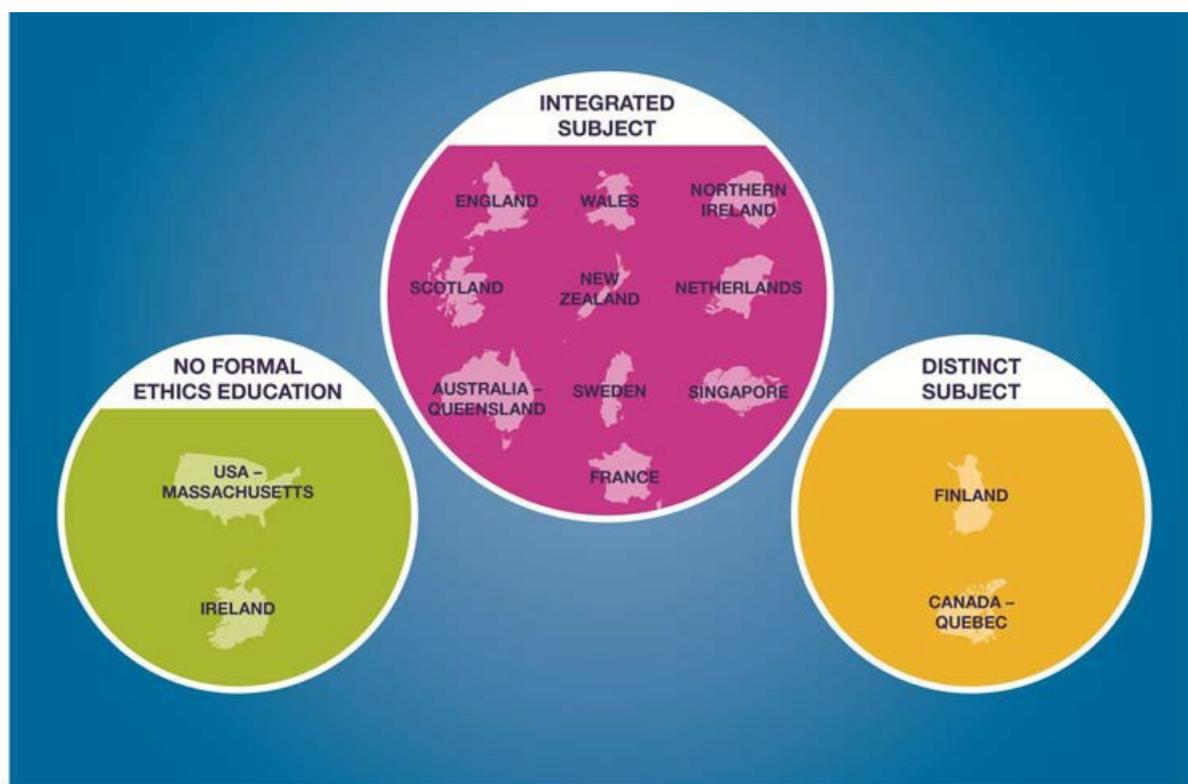


*The key messages for the provision of ethics education include:*

Ethics is generally an overarching principle of curriculum or integrated across curriculum areas and rarely a discrete subject. In two jurisdictions it is combined with ERB to form a distinct subject.

Common principles of ethics curricula include: ethics will help young people to understand and develop a personal commitment to the dignity and freedom of all human beings, the importance of human rights, the place of justice within society and the service of the common good.

Where ethics is taught as a discrete subject it is generally referred to as citizenship education.



In accompaniment to the Key Findings Summary, the NFER also compiled an extensive technical appendix. This appendix provides details of each jurisdiction’s provision of ERB and Ethics as well as providing additional information in relation to the context of curriculum implementation.

## An Overview of Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics

### Content in Patrons’ Programmes

This desk study examines current provision in Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics across the patrons’ programmes in Irish primary schools. The research studied six patron programmes, namely the new Catholic Religious Education Curriculum, the Follow Me programme, the Islamic Foundation of Ireland Primary Programme, Goodness Me, Goodness You!, Learn Together and the John Scottus School Trust Philosophical Programme.

Some general messages from the study include:

There is a variation in the autonomy afforded to schools in mediating patrons’ programmes. Some patrons place an onus on schools to develop programmes locally in line with the needs of the school

community and within the framework of the curricula provided by the patron; while others provide detailed programmes for schools and teachers to follow.

There is a great variety in the supports provided for schools and teachers in the mediation of the patrons' programmes. Some patrons provide online resources, schools visits/inspections, teacher guidelines and pupil books, while others are limited by resources in the amount of support they can provide.

There is a variation in the epistemological approaches advocated in teaching about religions and beliefs and ethics across patrons' programmes. There is evidence of socio-cultural, Socratic, pluralist, human rights and faith-based approaches.

Key messages for ERB:

There is variation in the provision for Education about Religions and Beliefs across programmes, particularly between denominational and multi-denominational patrons. In denominational programmes ERB occurs later in primary school (if at all), tends to be from a faith-based perspective and is generally confined to the three monotheist faiths of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. ERB in multi-denominational programmes tends to occur throughout primary school and involves learning about many religions and beliefs.

Within the multi-denominational sector there are a variety of approaches to teaching about religions and beliefs. These range from a fact-based approach with discrete learning areas, to a multi-belief approach with a more integrated method of teaching about religions and beliefs.

Teaching about religions and beliefs from a faith perspective is not a recommended approach for a national curriculum in ERB and developing a curriculum in ERB within this perspective is not appropriate for a national curriculum body to undertake.

Multi-denominational approaches to ERB may have a contribution to make towards the development of a national curriculum in ERB.

Key messages for ethics:

Denominational programmes support the teaching of ethics from a faith-based perspective.

There is great variation evident in the multi-denominational approach to ethics education. There is evidence of a rights-based approach, a Socratic approach and a pluralist approach to teaching ethics in these programmes.

Teaching ethics through a faith lens is not a recommended approach for a national curriculum in ethics.

Multi-denominational approaches may have a contribution to make towards the development of a national curriculum for ethics.

The three pieces of research presented above have helped inform the development of the rationale, aims and vision presented in the *Consultation Paper*.

# Appendix G: Overview of findings from online questionnaires: Darmody and Smyth (2016)

This appendix provides an overview of the findings from the questionnaires, as presented by Darmody and Smyth (2016). It outlines a summary of the responses to the different aspects of the proposals: the aims for the curriculum, the strands for the curriculum, skills and dispositions, methodologies. It also highlights the opportunities and challenges that people saw with the proposals, as well as presenting the conclusions that were drawn by the authors. All text below is taken directly from *Teachers', Parents' and the general Public's Views and Expectations of the Proposed Primary School Curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics* (Darmody & Smyth, 2016). The full text of the report can be found at [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie).

## Aims for the curriculum

Existing research has highlighted the need to promote a greater understanding of diversity amongst pupils (Maylor & Reed, 2007). A mono-cultural curriculum tends to reflect the histories and identities of the majority population. Countries across Europe vary in the extent to which they support diversity and combat discrimination. According to a recent Eurobarometer survey<sup>16</sup> (2015), discrimination is particularly prevalent in two areas: ethnic origin and religion or beliefs. In Ireland, 58 per cent of the respondents felt that discrimination on the basis of ethnic origin is 'widespread'. This is somewhat lower than EU28 average at 64 per cent. Forty-one per cent of the Irish population believed that discrimination was also widespread in the area of religion or beliefs, again lower than EU figures at 50 per cent. Irish respondents agreed with statements about the need for the content of school lessons and materials to address diversity in the following areas: ethnic origin (88%); religion or beliefs (86%); sexual orientation (77%); gender identity (75%). The corresponding figures for EU28 were: 81%; 80%; 67%; 64%. Thus, while the consultation survey findings cannot be seen as generalisable to the whole population, they are located against a backdrop for public support for schools to address diversity.

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<sup>16</sup> See: Special Eurobarometer 437. Discrimination in the EU in 2015.  
<http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/SPECIAL/surveyKy/2077>.

In the NCCA survey, educators, parents and members of the general public provided their views on the proposed aims for the ERB and Ethics curriculum. The overall majority of educators broadly agreed with all six proposed aims and were most likely to strongly support statements relating to human diversity, rights and responsibilities and the impact of prejudice and discrimination. The views differed by school sector (Catholic, minority religion, multi/interdenominational and other<sup>17</sup>), with respondents from the multi/interdenominational sector more likely to strongly support aims relating to aspects of character development and diversity. Almost three-quarters of parents (73%) strongly supported aims associated with recognition of unfairness, injustice, and the impact of discrimination; and also development of self-awareness, confidence, personal beliefs and forming positive identities. Parents with children attending multi/intercultural schools were somewhat more likely to support aims about human diversity, relationships with others and curiosity about religions. Like the educators and parents, members of the general public broadly supported the proposed aims of the curriculum, especially in areas such as the impact of discrimination, and relating to others. Members of the general public were more likely than parents to strongly support aims relating to the respect for beliefs and values and curiosity about religions.

The educators considered the suggested aims sufficiently extensive. When asked if there were additional aims that could be added, about 30 per cent felt that no additional aims or ideas needed to be added. The aims that were suggested by a small number of respondents included character development and moral values among others. Over half of the educators wanted to retain all suggested aims. However, under a quarter of those responding to the survey felt that many were already covered by the primary school curriculum and a small number (7%) felt that faith formation should be removed from schools. The surveys indicated that the stakeholders were broadly supportive of the suggested aims and ideas. However, it was evident that there was some confusion about the position of the suggested curriculum in the existing structure. Many thought that as several areas are already covered by the current primary school curriculum either by specific subject areas or across programmes, the new curriculum will duplicate what is already provided. The position of faith formation and sacraments in the curriculum<sup>18</sup> proved to be divisive with some stakeholders arguing for the status quo, while others alluded to the discriminatory nature of current practice that gives prominence to one religion.

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<sup>17</sup> This category included individuals representing higher education or early childhood sectors, among others. <sup>18</sup> While faith formation and sacraments are not a feature of the primary school curriculum, they are, however, a feature of denominational patron programmes.

## Strands for the curriculum

Inclusive education tends to expand what is taught in the common curriculum. According to UNESCO, inclusion is

a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children. (UNESCO, 2005)

In other words, an inclusive curriculum can be defined as one that accommodates the needs of all children in the classroom. It has been argued that an inclusive and culturally relevant curriculum creates more equitable education for young people and helps to reduce prejudice and discrimination against marginalised populations (Sleeter, 2011).

This study explored educators' views of the appropriateness of the five proposed Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics curriculum strands. The respondents were also broadly supportive of the five strands of the curriculum: personal understanding, mutual understanding, spiritual awareness, character education and connection with the wider world. However, they were somewhat less likely to agree with the appropriateness of 'spiritual awareness' as a strand. When exploring responses by school type, it emerged that those from the multi/intercultural sector were more likely to support the inclusion of 'mutual understanding' as a strand in the curriculum. Suggestions for additional strands included areas such as tolerance of faith/other religions; acceptance of diversity; development of personal skills such as critical thinking; development of own faith; rights and equality and other similar areas. Several respondents argued against including religious education in the curriculum, although these opinions diverged depending on the sector the educators represented. In addition, a minority were unsure about the inclusion of 'character development' in the programme. A strand on 'mutual understanding' was considered to be too ambiguous by some respondents who were concerned that this may lead to different interpretations. There were no significant differences in educators' views by school type or years of experience.

## Skills and dispositions

Dispositions are frequent and voluntary habits of thinking and doing:

a pattern of behaviour exhibited frequently in the absence of coercion constituting a habit of mind under some conscious and voluntary control intentional and oriented to broad goals (Katz, 1993:16).

They are acquired, supported, or weakened by interactive experiences in an environment with significant adults and peers (Bertram & Pascal 2002).

All stakeholders in this study were asked to comment on the appropriate skills and dispositions which should be fostered by the proposed curriculum. The educators were most supportive of areas that help children to deal with prejudice and discrimination, develop empathy, and awareness of rights and responsibilities. Parents were most supportive of providing children with critical thinking skills, helping them to understand the impact of prejudice and discrimination and develop self-respect. The members of the general public also considered the development of critical thinking skills as a priority; followed by development of empathy and questioning. The responses show that there was consensus across the stakeholders in supporting skills and forming dispositions in the field of social justice and equality.

Parents held diverging views about the potential contribution the curriculum could make. While the majority felt that children would benefit from learning about different belief systems and to respect people who do not subscribe to any, others (a few) noted that by enrolling their child in a denominational school they had made a conscious choice for the child to receive faith formation. It is worth pointing out that one approach to learning does not necessarily exclude the other. However, balance is needed and parents' views taken into account. The views varied more within the denominational sector rather than between sectors. The new curriculum could also be seen to contribute to areas such as social norms and morals; equality and tolerance; human rights and responsibilities. Ethics was considered useful, and was, by some parents, seen as a good substitute for faith formation in denominational schools. Members of the general public were most likely to see the contribution of the curriculum in teaching children about various religions and none, followed by promotion of diversity and tolerance, social norms and critical thinking.

## Methodologies and strategies

In order to promote respect and tolerance, numerous authors have highlighted the need for a culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy.<sup>19</sup> From this perspective, the cultural and social identities of pupils are seen as assets rather than as deficits or limitations. These identities are not ignored in education but become triggers and resources for learning.

The survey sought educators' views on the appropriate methodologies and strategies to be used to deliver the proposed curriculum. Of the listed options, they were particularly in favour of utilising whole-class discussion as an approach, followed by circle time, thinking time/philosophy, and links with parents and community. Suggestions for additional approaches to be considered included an enquiry-based approach, case-studies, talks, story-telling and project research. There were no significant differences between the respondents' views by school type or years of experience. An open question explored what other strategies should be included in the curriculum. The responses given were very varied with no one methodology dominating. The suggested approaches included: enquiry-based approach, case studies, talks and story-telling among others. Active teaching techniques rooted in inquiry-based learning are likely to support pupils' engagement. This approach promotes the development of critical thinking, active learning and in-depth information processing (Minner et al., 2010).

## Opportunities and challenges

The educators saw a number of potential opportunities provided by the proposed curriculum. These included examining one's own school ethos; offering a balanced approach to learning; supporting inclusivity in schools; promoting respect for diversity; providing a useful framework for teaching; promoting pupils' well-being; providing children with valuable life skills; supporting a cross-curricular approach; supporting positive character development in children; and, offering the removal of religious instruction from schools. Although the views were broadly similar across school sectors in terms of the potential of the curriculum to enhance areas already addressed by schools such as diversity and tolerance, the views tended to diverge regarding the position of faith instruction and sacraments in the school. In fact, some educators from Catholic and minority religion schools felt that

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<sup>19</sup> See Materials on Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Practice from National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (NCCRESt).

[http://www.nccrest.org/professional/culturally\\_responsive\\_pedagogy-and.html](http://www.nccrest.org/professional/culturally_responsive_pedagogy-and.html)

the curriculum may challenge the ethos of their school. Some educators also felt that they would not like to see the denominational ethos of the school changed, while others commented on potential opposition from Church authorities, faith communities and some parents. Curriculum overload and time were seen as the biggest challenges by the educators. The respondents were concerned about duplication with subjects such as SPHE, RE and other curriculum areas. It seemed, however, that many respondents had not engaged with the consultation/ background paper regarding the position of ERB and Ethics that explained issues around compatibility of the proposed curriculum with patrons' programmes, different school types, taking an age-appropriate approach to teaching sensitive topics in an inclusive way. It was clear that all stakeholders need additional information about the practical implementation of the curriculum. It is also necessary to be clear how the new curriculum content is covered by different subject areas in order to avoid duplication.

## Conclusions

This chapter has explored stakeholders' views on different components of the proposed curriculum and the potential opportunities and challenges it would bring. As the impetus for introducing the curriculum emerged from the recommendations of the Forum for Patronage, the survey did not ask whether such a curriculum should be introduced. Despite that the participants in the survey held strong views on this matter, the majority supported the proposed aims of the curriculum and saw the new curriculum as an opportunity to introduce new dimensions into the curriculum. Others, however, felt that such a curriculum is not needed; that the current curriculum is already overcrowded; and that the suggested topics duplicate a lot of what is already taught in the primary schools. As was expected, views diverged along the lines of religious denomination. Teachers in multi/intercultural schools were more likely to be open to teaching about different religions, beliefs and acknowledging peoples' rights for secular views as well as support character development and social justice. Interestingly, views also diverged within the Catholic school sector, with some teachers arguing for removing religious instruction from schools and making faith formation the responsibility of the parents; while others argued for maintaining the present practice. Overall, the respondents to the survey felt that primary school children would benefit from knowing about different religions and cultures; and that young children should be taught about diversity and tolerance.

# Appendix H: Overview of findings from case-study schools

In order to gain an insight into the complexities of the issues concerning implementation of a new curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics and to engage with schools on their current practice, the NCCA worked with seven case-study schools.

The case-study research investigated two questions:

1. What practices are currently taking place in schools that lend themselves to the type of teaching and learning envisaged in a curriculum for ERB and Ethics?
2. What are the perceived opportunities and challenges that the introduction of the proposed curriculum may have for schools?

The questions were explored by facilitating discussion groups with teachers, school leaders, parents, children and boards of management. Although findings from this kind of research are not generalisable, they have been extremely useful in identifying issues that do not emerge through broad consultation formats.

The school case-studies were developed to add depth to the themes emerging in the consultation. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, participants drew on their experience and provided relevant examples from their practice. The research provided an insight into the reality of what is happening in the local school context and the opportunities and challenges that are presented by the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics. Participants, in their responses, provided links to their immediate environment and experience at local level which have greatly informed the consultation process.

Significantly the school case-studies also provided opportunity to work with children in the schools. In order to do this, consent was received from the parents of each child in fourth, fifth and sixth class. Children from the senior end of primary school were selected using a 'fitness for purpose' model (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 117) taking into account accessibility to the sample and the human resources available to the NCCA. Prior to the visit, teachers were provided with stimulus material to encourage engagement by children with some of the ideas and concepts behind the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics. In the presence of the classroom teacher, NCCA personnel worked with the children

in whole-class settings, as well as in smaller groups. Many of the participating children remarked that they appreciated the opportunity to explain why some of the concepts relating to ERB and Ethics are important to them and to talk about how they like to learn about such things. Responses by children were recorded by the children themselves, using a template provided (see Appendix D), and by an NCCA observer who took field notes during the process.

Given that the engagement with schools was confined to the period of the consultation, this engagement did not include observation over time, and relied heavily on data provided by the school. Such constraints did not allow for in-depth field observations and instead the research relied upon data that was self-reported from the school community. It was notable that a high number of the parents who met with the NCCA were members of the parents' association or board of management. Despite timetabling considerations resulting in some teachers not being able to attend the teacher sessions, a representative sample of teachers across the school was achieved. Finally, while the NCCA did work with children in the senior end of primary school, as time was a factor, the necessary trust building work required for meaningful engagement with younger children was not possible during the consultation process.

## School backgrounds

The section below provides a brief overview of the schools who took part in our consultation case-studies. A diverse range of schools were chosen in order provide a broader overview of practices and experiences.

The criteria for selecting schools involved the following:

- DEIS/non-DEIS
- denominational/multi-denominational
- English-medium schools/Irish medium schools
- urban/rural
- school size.

An overview of the seven schools is provided in Table H1. Below the table provides an overview of the schools that took part.

Table H1: Overview of case-study schools

School number	Denominational/multi-denominational	DEIS/non-DEIS	Urban/rural	English speaking/Irish medium	School size
8.	Catholic	DEIS	Urban	English medium	c. 200
9.	Multi-denominational	Non-DEIS	Urban	Irish medium	c. 180
10.	Catholic	Non-DEIS	Urban	English medium	c. 450
11.	Catholic	Non-DEIS	Rural	English medium	c. 70
12.	Educate Together	DEIS	Rural	English medium	c. 130
13.	Church of Ireland	Non-DEIS	Rural	English medium	c. 200
14.	Community National School	Non-DEIS	Urban	English medium	c. 250

## Inclusive practices

In the course of case-study school visits participants were asked about the practices that took place within their school that related to the content of the proposals for ERB and Ethics. It was clear from responses that there was a broad diversity of practices taking place reflecting the type of teaching and learning envisaged in the proposals. It would seem that the diversity of practice was, to some extent, related to the specific needs of the school community. Unsurprisingly, multi-denominational schools demonstrated a great variety of practice reflecting their ethos, their patrons' programmes and their diverse pupil populations. There was also evidence that denominational schools provided learning experiences that allowed for children to engage with ideas outlined in ERB and Ethics. In these cases, what seemed most pertinent was the extent to which the school community itself was diverse. In denominational schools with significant diversity there was perhaps a need for greater reflection as to how to talk about religions, beliefs and ethics in the shared space of the school. Therefore, practices were often developed locally by schools to cater to their particular needs.

The types of practices highlighted included the celebration of feast days of different religions, intercultural week, projects on diversity and the space for children to talk about beliefs and traditions that were important to them. For example, in one Catholic school Muslim children were permitted to bring in their prayer mat, providing them with the opportunity to pray and also to show classmates the practices that were important to them and their family. Schools also talked about current events

providing a springboard to talk about sensitive topics, particularly with older children. The example of the Paris attacks was provided as demonstrating how children could pick up stereotypical views of religions and the need to counter this when it arises. While the types of practices reflecting the ERB component of the proposals were more visible, it was widely considered that the Ethics component was reflected in the teaching of SPHE and also in the various patrons' programmes. The Ethics component was seen to resonate with the lived reality of school life. The various patrons' programmes, it was suggested, also made space to a varying degree for the types of learning envisaged in ERB. This of course would seem self-evident in multi-denominational schools, but it was also occasionally mentioned in denominational schools. Indeed, in one Catholic school with a diverse population, children were given the opportunity during time devoted to the patron's programme to discuss their beliefs and were encouraged to do projects on these.

Relationships with parents were commonly highlighted as being of paramount importance. In one Educate Together school parents spoke to classes about their religion or beliefs. All schools, however, stressed the importance of good communication with the parents.

## Skills and dispositions

Emerging strongly in conversations with school communities was the emphasis placed by respondents on the importance of supporting children's development of certain skills and dispositions. As noted above, schools placed great emphasis on positive relationships with parents. Indeed, fostering positive relationships within schools was seen as hugely significant in this area. One principal noted, when discussing criteria she believed to be important when employing teachers, 'Do they have a good relationship with the children?'

Many participants proposed relational skills and dispositions as being central to the type of teaching and learning envisaged in ERB and Ethics. The need to be respectful and to foster respect were mentioned across contexts. The importance of fostering empathy was another key disposition proposed in different contexts. As one teacher noted, 'It's about teaching kids empathy, walk a mile in my shoes.' Tolerance and openness were also suggested on different occasions. The principal of a Catholic school proposed the importance of positive encounter and engagement with the 'other' as a means of combatting stereotypes or prejudices. Indeed, this response reflects the importance placed consistently on the capacity for positive communication, even when this term itself was not used. As one teacher noted, children start to recognise difference and diversity early and they need to be able to 'put language on that'. One participant spoke of the need for appropriate conversations.

It was also proposed that ERB and Ethics may help facilitate nuanced conversations around difference and diversity. One teacher spoke of the sensationalist manner in which children speak about current events and want to know who are the 'good guys' and who are the 'bad guys'. Engaging in thoughtful discussions in this area may help challenge existing prejudice.

Many of the skills and dispositions mentioned during the case-study research relate to aspects of social and emotional learning. This was a link explicitly made by the principal of a Community National School who stated that the school placed a significant emphasis on this aspect of learning. The development of the social and emotional capacities of children was considered as the foundation for positive interaction on the part of pupils.

In general, although children spoke of acquiring knowledge about religions, beliefs and ethics, more often during discussions the affective aspects of the learning were underlined. Where knowledge was mentioned it was usually as a means of engaging children's curiosity, combatting stereotypes, promoting mutual understanding, and generally developing the skills and dispositions children need to thrive in the diverse world in which they live.

## Other opportunities

During the school case-studies participants were asked what opportunities the introduction of ERB and Ethics might bring. In many cases these related to the development of skills and dispositions, as outlined above.

However, participants also suggested the possibilities of fostering greater inclusion in schools, reflecting the need for a 'more proactive approach to inclusion' from the leaders of education, according to one principal. The need for schools to help promote inclusion was considered important in the context of a society that has become increasingly diverse. The introduction of ERB and Ethics would reflect the real-world experience of children in which they would encounter people from 'all walks of life'. It was also felt that ERB, in particular, would help children to see the similarities between religions. Also mentioned was the need to counteract the rise of Islamophobia, again reflecting findings from the above section in which ERB and Ethics was seen as potentially combatting stereotypes and prejudice. It was also suggested that ERB and Ethics could play a role in preventing religious 'radicalisation'. This view reflects the 'securitisation' approach to teaching about religions and beliefs taken in other jurisdictions. This, however, was not an opinion commonly expressed during the school case-studies.

Suggestions were also made that there may be opportunities to link or to integrate elements of ERB and Ethics into existing curricular areas or subjects. SPHE was mentioned regularly, with history and geography also mentioned on occasion. Participants also made reference to links with current patrons' programmes.

## Challenges

When asked about challenges, a number were identified. The related issues of curriculum overload and time constraints arose frequently, as they did in other consultation formats. For the principal of one Catholic school, 'the only problem that I can see with this is time constraints'. The principal expanded that in recent years schools and teachers have been pushed to the 'pin of their collar' with the extent of the changes and initiatives introduced into the education sector, a sentiment echoed elsewhere. Therefore, the introduction of an additional curriculum would prove challenging. As the member of the board of management of a large Catholic school noted, 'It's hard to see it working without the time being given.'

It was suggested on several occasions that the introduction of ERB and Ethics needed to be handled sensitively. Comparisons were made to the introduction of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) as part of the SPHE curriculum, which was a sensitive and challenging area of learning for schools when initially introduced. Therefore, not only did the case-study research highlight the importance of sensitivity in introducing ERB and Ethics, but also the need for it to be mediated with care in the classroom. A parent from a Catholic school, whose children did not participate in faith formation, noted the importance of the teacher's role.

How the teacher engages with children of minority faith is huge.....because we judge and even though they are professional nonetheless they are all white Irish Catholic and mostly female.

The above quote suggests the need for self-reflexivity on the part of teachers and a capacity to understand children who were not part of the majority faith of the school. While many parents of minority faith in the denominational schools who took part spoke highly of the experience of their children in those schools, this experience was not universal. Some parents of minority faith whose children attended multid denominational schools spoke of previous experiences with denominational schools, which led them to seek a change. Therefore, this suggests that the types of conversations and practices that teachers and schools engage in make a difference to the experience of children, particularly those who may otherwise be marginalised. This is demanding both of schools and of

teachers and many participants and would therefore require appropriate training and cpd, according to many participants.

The question of where ERB and Ethics would sit with the patron's programme also arose. In multi-denominational schools it was felt that ERB and Ethics could complement current programmes. Although the question was slightly more complex for denominational schools, only a small minority of participants suggested that there was any difficulty with the introduction of ERB and Ethics. In one case a teacher was concerned that the introduction of ERB and Ethics might replace the patron's programme. In another school the home school liaison teacher noted that some parents from the travelling community had expressed reservations about such a programme. However, these parents could not attend the meeting. From these parents there was concern in regards to the teaching about other religions, and fear that faith formation would be diminished as a result. The Catholic ethos and identity of the school, along with the practices and the instruction, was very important to them. Although ERB and Ethics was portrayed as challenging the ethos of denominational schools in many written submissions, this was not a finding that emerged to any great extent during the school case-studies. All schools highlighted the importance of their ethos and their values but these were not seen to be in conflict with ERB and Ethics. In general schools were highly positive towards the type of teaching and learning envisaged in the proposals, with time constraints and curriculum overload being considered the primary obstacles.

## The children's voices

In the course of the school visits during the case-study research, children shared their thoughts on how the concepts in ERB and Ethics related to their lives and the types of learning they wished to engage with around this subject matter. Stimulus materials relating to the values that underpin the proposals for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics were developed with the aim of prompting the interest of children. Following a related activity, information was gathered through semi-structured discussions with children from fourth, fifth and sixth classes. Children were encouraged to discuss ideas and concepts from the proposals, linked to questions of identity and rights, and were asked how they would like to learn more about these. After discussion in groups, children highlighted a range of suggestions and ideas. These broadly fell into five categories.

Many children suggested **talk-based or dialogical approaches** such as discussions and debates in which children learn from each other.

- 'Talk more about everyone's experience to do with these subjects.'

- 'A group discussion.'
- 'Talk about it more often in groups.'
- 'Through acting and debates.'

Children also suggested learning about the ideas of ERB and Ethics in **inquiry-based or project-type activities**.

- 'Do projects on different places of worship in other religions.'
- 'Read books on the subject.'
- 'Maybe more projects or presentations.'
- 'Research on other beliefs in their places of worship.'
- 'Make a poster about other religions with facts.'
- 'Make video clips of people talking about their religion.'

There were also proposals that such learning could be mediated through **arts-based activities** and through **creative forms**.

- 'Drama, music or art that includes the subject.'
- 'Make a game.'
- 'Make an app about religion so you can play and learn more.'

Indeed, learning through the use of **ICT methods** was mentioned on numerous occasions.

- 'Watching videos about different religions and beliefs and learn about what people think by going to places and meeting new people.'
- 'Using computers or Ipads to learn more about people who have fought for justice and learn about other people's culture.'

**Experiential modes of learning** arose very strongly in feedback from many of the children's groups.

- 'Visit places of worship of other beliefs.'
- 'Identity: By socialising with other people apart from your friends and family. By not beating around the bush and being direct with people...'
- 'Belonging: There should be a student council and children could vote for the president, vice-president etc. All children will be allowed to vote as they are all part of our association.'
- 'People with different religions could talk about what they do and how they practice their religion.'
- 'Meeting religions leaders (sic).'

- ‘Experience an hour without respects, right(s), justice and see how you are after.’
- ‘...Go on trips out to places and visiting speakers could come...’
- ‘Belonging: Letting everyone get included not living (sic) them out playing with new kids letting them feel that they belong their (sic) and not feel bad.’

As the above quotation highlights children often expressed a desire to engage in activities that were inclusive in nature. However, one group succinctly encapsulated much of the sentiment expressed among the children.

- ‘Keep the lessons fun.’

Undoubtedly, many of the comments and suggestions reflect practices that the children are already familiar with and enjoy.

## Final remarks

The school case-studies provided an opportunity to speak to school communities and see how the proposals related to what takes place on the ground. There was a broad range of practices evident in the schools, reflecting some of the learning envisaged in ERB. The extent to which teachers engaged with religious diversity very often seemed linked to the immediate needs of the school community. This type of learning was broadly seen as a positive initiative, a position that was perhaps expressed more clearly in more diverse schools. The Ethics component was also received positively, with clear links to the SPHE curriculum being identified. Overall the greatest obstacle to the introduction of a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics was the sense of curriculum overload and time constraints.

# Appendix I: Overview of findings from discussion groups

## Introduction

The five discussion groups with teachers addressed the following questions:

- What benefits and opportunities do the proposals for ERB and Ethics provide for teachers and children?
- How do the aims of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics contribute to the schoolethos?
- What challenges do you foresee with the introduction of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics?
- What are teachers doing in classrooms and schools that already reflect the aims of ERB and Ethics?
- How would the introduction of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics impact on your role as teacher?

Contributions were recorded using flip-charts and field notes. An overview of points that were presented during the discussion groups are shown under each question below.

### What benefits and opportunities do the proposals for ERB and Ethics provide for teachers and children?

During the discussion groups broad support was expressed for the type of teaching and learning in the proposals. Participants expressed a number of ways in which ERB and Ethics could benefit children and teachers.

It was suggested that ERB and Ethics could support the inclusion of all children irrespective of their faith, belief and/or culture in Irish primary schools. For some participants this was a 'positive' development and would have 'a unifying effect' for children in their classrooms, accommodating all children of diverse cultures and beliefs. It could also provide 'consistency of inclusive practice in

religions and beliefs'. This reflected the recognition that what takes place in schools currently may vary greatly from one school to the next. It was also suggested that creating a 'space to express identity' would contribute to the creation of inclusive environments. By recognising the 'child's values and beliefs' there was the potential to bolster a sense of belonging.

Many of the participating teachers described the current situation in schools, where children encounter classmates of different faiths and beliefs in their classroom, as providing a basis or rationale for the proposals. Therefore, according to one participant, 'there is a need for children to learn about other religions'. While the classroom and indeed the community are spaces where children encounter religious diversity, it was also noted that through print, audio, video and social media children become aware of the 'other' and 'wider reality'. Therefore, in such contexts, learning about other religions could 'teach tolerance' and 'create empathy, not division'. Indeed fostering empathy was highlighted on a number of occasions as important in helping children to engage positively with diversity. ERB and Ethics could provide children with the 'language of difference' that would help 'explore diversity'. This was a recognition that appropriate language can often be challenging for teachers and children when trying to speak about diversity respectfully.

Participants felt that learning about other faiths and beliefs could 'feed the children's curiosity'. Children are naturally curious about the world around them and are interested in the lives of people within their communities. Therefore, developing the dispositions necessary to engage sensitively with others on questions relating to ERB and Ethics was considered a positive step. Indeed, the authentic pluralism outlined in the proposals was highlighted by one participant as an appropriate approach for engaging with this area of learning and could contribute to children's interactions. However, a note of caution was added that children of minority beliefs or religions would not be put under pressure or become spokespersons for their tradition.

The view was expressed that ERB and Ethics was an opportunity to contribute to how children understand the world. It could help frame what would become 'their world vision'. In doing so it would build on children's 'innate sense of fairness' and would allow children to explore 'concepts of inequality and justice'. In this way it could contribute to the ethical development of children and contribute to much of the work that already takes place in school.

One participant proposed that ERB and Ethics could benefit from a similar approach to values education. Such an approach places significant emphasis on the development of social and relationship skills. Named values such as respect or cooperation are explicitly taught in class. According to the participant, this approach boosts confidence and self-esteem. Indeed, by developing

social and emotional skills ERB and Ethics was considered by others to potentially contribute to 'flourishing and wellbeing'.

It was also suggested that ERB and Ethics provided for continuity with 'what happens in junior cert and leaving cert'. Indeed, potential for continuity across the primary curriculum was also highlighted by participants who made links to other curriculum areas such as SPHE and SESE. This is discussed in further detail below. Finally, it is possible to discern connections, although not explicitly made, between the themes of Aistear and the responses of some of the participants. The use of terms such as identity, belonging and wellbeing clearly reflect Aistear's themes.

## How do the aims of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics contribute to the school ethos?

When speaking about how a curriculum in ERB and Ethics could contribute to school ethos, a range of opinions and ideas were voiced. While the patrons' programmes set the tone for school ethos, it was suggested by many participants that the proposals for the curriculum could complement this work and would 'encourage, reinforce and enhance inclusivity and holistic education'. From this view, ERB and Ethics could play a contributory role to the efforts that schools make to create inclusive environments. This emphasis on the inclusive potential of ERB and Ethics reflected findings in other consultation formats.

The question of what the proposals would specifically mean for denominational schools was raised. For many respondents it was felt that ERB and Ethics could help such schools cater for the growing diversity within their communities, creating space for the expression of identity. Some participants proposed that denominational schools already make significant efforts to foster inclusion within their communities, noting the Grow in Love programme in Catholic schools which has learning outcomes dedicated to inter-religious learning. Indeed, links were made on a number of occasions between aspects of the proposals and Grow in Love and participants sought clarification on the relationship between the curriculum and the patron's programme. However, others questioned the compatibility of the proposals with the ethos of denominational schools and some participants were concerned that this would mean less time for the patrons' programmes.

Not all schools have the same degree of diversity of religions and cultures within their communities. It was therefore suggested that this curriculum could be 'dependent on predominate need'. In schools

or areas of greater diversity, ERB and Ethics might have more resonance and be more applicable. However, the counter argument was also put forward. It was suggested that 'to make the country truly diverse it is essential to make such a programme available even to schools/areas that may not have diversity'.

Overall, however, there was a sense that the type of learning outlined in the proposals could contribute to inclusive school environments. Yet, there were also some expressions of reservation as to the implications for the ethos of denominational schools.

## What are we doing in classrooms and schools that already reflect these aims? What are the practices?

It was suggested that much of what is being proposed by the new curriculum is happening in schools already and that this happens in a number of ways. Links were made by participants to other curriculum areas, the various patrons' programmes, informal and incidental learning and also various initiatives that schools put in place in order to foster inclusion.

It was suggested that diversity was or could be acknowledged and celebrated in schools through flag days, food days, national days and festivals, examples reflecting the ideas proposed in the intercultural guidelines. A lot, it was suggested, was done informally and through incidental learning in schools already. School assemblies were seen as good places to introduce diversity and highlight world issues. Subtle messages about various cultures and beliefs are shared through the reading of novels. Therefore, the reading of novels provided an opportunity to engage with questions of diversity in nuanced ways. While these examples were mentioned as practices that potentially linked to the ideas in the proposals, little in the way of planned intentional practice emerged. It must also be added that while many of the examples reflected intercultural education there was less evidence of planned classroom work relating to the types of teaching and learning envisioned in ERB and Ethics.

Generally, participants were more likely to make connections between aspects of the proposals and various curriculum areas. In particular, it was suggested that 'SPHE covers a good deal of what is being proposed'. However, while SPHE may have been considered by many to have clear links to ERB and Ethics, it was highlighted that the time allocated for this subject in the curriculum is insufficient. Geography and history were also highlighted as areas that reflected some of the learning envisaged in ERB and Ethics. One participant noted that these subjects provided a curriculum space in which to celebrate ethnic and national diversity by marking different national days and festivals. However, as noted above there was little in the way of recognising religious diversity.

The various patrons' programmes were also highlighted as contributing to this area of learning. While links to multidenominational programmes were considered evident, some participants noted the provision within the new Catholic programme, in particular, of outcomes that linked to inter-religious learning. Through these and other activities in and out of the classroom, 'mutual respect, awareness and appreciation of other world religions and beliefs besides the Catholic faith are being passed on'.

There was an awareness of the complexity of diversity expressed in the discussion groups and the challenges that this posed for the type of teaching and learning that takes place in schools. As one participant stated, 'diversity exists within national, social and religious groupings'. The need for this to be addressed with sensitivity and respect was evident in discussions.

## How would this impact on you in your role as teacher?

A number of considerations arose when discussing the impact of the development of ERB and Ethics on the role of teachers. Training, the teaching of ERB and Ethics in conjunction with patrons' programmes and indeed the approaches to teaching and learning were among the ideas highlighted.

When speaking on the role of the teacher, the need for in-service and continuing professional development arose on a number of occasions. It was suggested that teachers may not possess the content knowledge in this area, particularly in relation to religions and beliefs and therefore 'could feel inadequate'. Providing relevant and adequate training was considered a necessity. The question of how standardised the proposed curriculum would be was also raised. There was a call for clarity in this regard as teachers would need to know what was expected of them. Clearly, as this was a new area in the curriculum teachers felt they needed to be adequately informed.

In regards to the teaching of ERB and Ethics, it was suggested that it was not enough to merely provide objective information about religions and beliefs. The experiential aspect of learning was highlighted as important. It was necessary for teachers to 'give a feel or an experience' of what was being presented to ensure it wasn't merely an 'academic venture'. Therefore, a transmission model of learning in which children learned facts about religions and beliefs was considered unsuitable.

It was also proposed that it could be a challenge for a teacher to remain neutral when teaching about religions and beliefs, especially if the same teacher was also involved in teaching the patron's programme. The challenge of whether it was appropriate to teach ERB and Ethics through a 'faith lens' was a related consideration. A possible solution to some of these challenges highlighted for the teaching of ERB and Ethics was to receive the input of people of various faiths and beliefs, ensuring a certain degree of authenticity.

In teaching ERB and Ethics it was suggested that teachers are 'preparing children for life in a diverse world whether they live in urban or rural areas'. The teacher was, therefore, providing the space and opportunity for the acquisition of skills and dispositions that all children needed regardless of their immediate communities. It was also suggested that perhaps younger teachers may find the implementation of ERB and Ethics less challenging as they may 'bring a whole new ethic where they are open to change and will knuckle down to take on the new'.

## Other challenges and questions

During the discussions, participants were offered the opportunity to voice challenges or questions and a number of issues were raised. Reflecting a trend from all other formats of consultation, the question of time allocation and curriculum overload emerged strongly. This was evident in the response of one participant who noted that we 'all recognise the value of such a curriculum but where is the time'. It was argued that, 'tá go leor le déanamh ag múinteoirí reiligiún agus anois an t-ábhar seo'. This sense of overload, although usually referred to as curriculum overload, extended to initiatives and factors beyond the primary curriculum. This was encapsulated by one participant who suggested having a 'flag-free year' as a means of overcoming this experience.

The question was asked whether ERB and Ethics needed to be a discrete curriculum, or whether it could be incorporated into other areas of the curriculum. SPHE and aspects of SESE were considered to align with ERB and Ethics. As highlighted above, this suggestion was made several times. Questions were also asked about the title. One participant queried whether changing the name of the proposed curriculum to *Ethics and ERB* may be less challenging.

Some participants wondered if it was possible for children, and indeed teachers, to opt-out of ERB and Ethics. However, others argued for the need to 'emphasise that it is for all'. Suggestions were made that those designing the curriculum needed to work closely and 'in collaboration with existing patrons' programme designers' to ensure that they were complementary.

The view was also expressed during discussions that some parents would like their children in primary school to learn exclusively about their own religion, 'they could always learn about other religions and beliefs later'. Some respondents working in denominational schools felt that it was important for the child to be formed/grounded in their own faith or belief before learning about other religions and beliefs. This linked also to the need for ERB and Ethics to be age-appropriate. Concern was expressed that some themes outlined in the proposals may be too sensitive for young children, 'the journey of

life and death' being highlighted as an example. RSE was provided as an example of how a new area of learning could be introduced in an age-appropriate and sensitive manner.

Although there was broad support for the type of teaching and learning envisaged in the proposals generally, a small number of participants were strongly opposed to any such changes, irrespective of issues of how it was introduced. Their concerns broadly arose from their desire to safeguard the ethos of their schools, as they understood it.

## Final remarks

The discussion groups provided teachers from different schools and areas the opportunity to come together and discuss the proposals for ERB and Ethics. It allowed them to voice their opinions regarding some of the opportunities and challenges as they understood them. For many participants the types of teaching and learning envisioned in the proposals could bolster the work that schools already do in creating inclusive environments. ERB and Ethics could support the development of skills and dispositions that children need to thrive in increasingly diverse communities. Others were concerned, however, that ERB and Ethics could be a challenge for the ethos of denominational schools. As in previous NCCA consultations, the question of curriculum overload and time allocation was raised in all groups.