



Background Paper and Brief for the Review of Junior Cycle Religious Education

For consultation

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1. Introduction

Religious Education will be introduced in 2019 as a Phase Five subject as part of the new junior cycle. This paper provides a background for the development of the specification for Junior Cycle Religious Education. It begins by presenting a brief overview of the background to the existing Religious Education syllabus. It then presents observations on the current syllabus, including the experiences of students and teachers. It summarises European practice and research in the area of religious education and some developments at a national level that are likely to be relevant to the development of the new specification. Finally, it sets out the brief for the development of the specification.

2. Background

2.1. The place of Religious Education within the curriculum

The 1996 UNESCO Report, *Learning: The Treasure Within*, argued that education throughout life is based on four pillars: Learning to know (acquiring the instruments of understanding), Learning to Do (to be able to act creatively on one's environment), Learning to Live Together (so as to participate and co-operate with other people in all human activities) and Learning to Be (with the aim of the development and fulfilment of the person).¹

These aims are summarised in the conviction that:

*Education should contribute to every person's complete development – mind and body, intelligence, sensitivity, aesthetic appreciation and spirituality. The aim of this development is the complete fulfilment of the human person, in all the richness of his or her personality, the complexity of his or her forms of expression and his or her various commitments – as individual, member of a family and of a community, citizen and a producer, inventor of techniques and creative dreamer.*²

Such a vision of education integrates body, mind, and spirit and puts the whole person at the heart of the education process. This vision, as expressed in the UNESCO Report, is shared by the 1995 White Paper, *Charting our Education Future*, which calls for a comprehensive philosophy of education that prepares people for lifelong education and is both student centred and globally

¹ Jacques Delors, *Learning: The Treasure Within: Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1996).

² Delors, p.8

focussed in terms of emphases.³ Such a philosophy may be discerned in the way that education in its broadest terms is described here:

*The general aim of education is to contribute towards the development of all aspects of the individual, including aesthetic, creative, critical, cultural, emotional, intellectual, moral, physical, political, social and spiritual development, for personal and family life, for working life, for living in community and for leisure.*⁴

The understanding underpinning this aim is that all education is inherently formative and holistic, and includes the moral, spiritual, social, emotional, physical and personal development of students alongside their intellectual development. While not all school subjects contribute in the same way to each dimension of the development of the student, all subjects must be taught in such a way as not to undermine any of the dimensions. The State assumes that religious education has something to contribute to the development of the student and the State is committed to ensure that 'all students, in accordance with their abilities' should have 'formative experiences in moral, religious and spiritual education',⁵ having due regard for the rights of the child and their parents to freedom of religion. It is this inclusive approach to the education of the person that allows for the inclusion of religious education as a legitimate activity of the State.

Religious education can be described as the critical encounter between education and religion. The use of the word critical indicates that this encounter is intentional and draws on both religious and educational principles to create the possibility of a critically reflective dialogue between the learner and religion(s) for the purpose of understanding both the content and expression of religious beliefs. Dermot Lane has suggested that '*a new relationship needs to be established between education and religion. This new relationship between religion and education is best understood in terms of a critical dialogue.*'⁶

To be an educational pursuit, religious education offered by the State has to go beyond simply offering information and facts about religion(s) and worldviews in a detached manner. It should facilitate young people in engaging with their learning in ways that offers insights and wisdom for the student's own life. Good religious education enables personal engagement, reflection and

³ Government of Ireland, *Charting our Education Future: White Paper on Education* (Dublin: The Stationery Office, 1992), pp. 12-13

⁴ NCCA, *A programme for reform: Curriculum and assessment policy toward the new century*, p. 26

⁵ *Charting Our Educational Future*, p. 50

⁶ Dermot Lane, *Religion and Education: Re-imagining the Relationship* (Dublin: Veritas, 2013) p.31

response as students '*deal creatively, critically and reflectively with plurality, identity and fundamental life options*'.⁷

In this regard, religious education provides '*a space like no other*' for students to discuss questions of depth and meaning and to come to know themselves and each other. The students' own experience and continuing search for meaning is encouraged and supported. Within the RE class a variety of ways of knowing and learning are valued.

*'RE offers a space like no other: for encounter, explanation, and empathy; for expression, interpretation, and imagination; for interrogation, questioning, and reflection. ...It gives an opportunity for students to experience and to bring into dialogue with one another both insider and outsider perspectives with regard to religious issues. It prompts pupils to think about similarities and differences between people and, in so doing, to reflect upon their own uniqueness and forms of belonging.'*⁸

Finally, religious education as part of a state curriculum is grounded in values of freedom, dignity, inclusion, justice and equality. As such it can contribute to building a more socially cohesive society; *a society that is plural but integrated, diverse but responsible, truth-seeking but respectful and compassionate.*⁹

2.2. The evolution of Religious Education as a second level examination subject

Historically the status of religious education in schools in the Republic of Ireland was determined by the declaration of the Intermediate Education (Ireland) Act, 1878, which states '*no examination shall be held in any subject of religious instruction, nor any payment made in respect thereof*'. The State's position was that it could provide for religious instruction through its inclusion within school time, the recognition of qualifications to teach religion, and the payment of teachers of religion, but could not directly provide the curriculum, resources, or assessment of religious instruction such that it

⁷ Lieven Boeve, 'Beyond Correlation Strategies: Teaching Religion in a Detraditionalised and Pluralised Context', in *Hermeneutics and Religious Education*, ed. by Herman Lombaerds and Didier Pollefyt (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), pp. 233-254 (p. 253).

⁸ John Sullivan, 'A space like no other', in *Does Religious Education Matter?* ed. by Mary Shanahan (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 7.

⁹ Patricia Kieran, 'Taking Diversity of Belief Seriously in Contemporary Ireland: The Challenge for Religious Education in Irish Schools', in *Toward Mutual Ground: Pluralism, Religious Education and Diversity in Irish Schools*, ed. by Gareth Byrne and Patricia Kieran, (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2013) p. 24.

could be construed as promoting a particular religious viewpoint. Consequently, the provision of religious instruction was regarded as the sole responsibility of the churches and faith communities whose concern mainly was with the faith formation of its members.

In February 1976, the Episcopal Conference of the Catholic Church in Ireland requested that the Department of Education introduce Religious Studies, understood as an academic study of the Catholic faith, as an examination subject. In 1977, subsequent to the refusal of their request by the DES, the Episcopal Conference set up a Working Party to draw up a draft syllabus for Religious Studies for Leaving Certificate, an amended version of which was submitted to the DES in 1982. However, due to the prohibition on the State examination of religion neither proposal was accepted. In 1986 and 1989 questions about the possibility of the introduction of Religious Studies as a Leaving Certificate examination subject were raised in the Dáil. The advice of the Chief State Solicitor was that an amendment to the Intermediate Education Act, 1878 would be necessary in order to introduce Religious Studies as a subject in the Leaving Certificate programme. The trajectory toward State provision of religious education re-emerged in the 1995 submission from the NCCA to the DES in which four reasons were advanced for advocating State provision of religious education on the grounds of public interest and arguing that it was no longer solely an ecclesial project. The four reasons were (i) the increasing professionalisation of teachers of religious education, (ii) the growing range of publically funded institutions offering specialist degrees in theology and religious education, (iii) the changing patterns of religious affiliation and practice, and (iv) the political imperative to build relationships between the major religions in Ireland. The submission also proposed an educational rationale for the inclusion of religious education in the curriculum:

*'Religious education, in offering opportunities to develop an informed and critical understanding of the Christian tradition in its historical origins and cultural and social expressions, should be part of a curriculum which seeks to promote the critical and cultural development of the individual in his or her social and personal contexts.'*¹⁰

The Education Act of 1998 paved the way for the State's involvement in religious education. This amendment marks the beginning of the shift from understanding the teaching and learning of religion as a solely ecclesial task to appreciating its role in educating for diversity, human rights, active citizenship and democracy and therefore a legitimate activity of the State. The Council of the NCCA approved the Junior Certificate syllabus at its meeting of 26th May, 1998. In December 1998, the Minister for Education and Science approved the syllabus and in June 1999, *Circular M 19/99*

¹⁰ NCCA, 'Submission to the Department of Education and Science from the Course Committee for Religious Education' (Dublin: NCCA, 1995), p. 5.

was issued to all second-level schools inviting them to participate in the phased introduction of Junior Certificate Religious Education.

Religious Education was introduced as an examination subject within the Junior Certificate Programme in 2000. This syllabus was developed following the same procedures set in place for the development of other subjects and evolved after a lengthy development and consultation process with relevant stakeholders. The introduction of this new Junior Certificate subject established Religious Education within the post-primary curriculum in the Republic of Ireland and marked an important milestone, as representatives from both the education partners and from different religious faiths supported the introduction of the syllabus which offered students the possibility of having their work in this subject area assessed and certified for the first time.

As a state syllabus aiming to be open to all students the course sought to avoid alignment with any one particular religion or denomination. It provided a framework for students of all religions and none, *'for encountering and engaging with the variety of religious traditions in Ireland and elsewhere'* (Syllabus p.4).

On the other hand, the syllabus moved beyond a phenomenological approach¹¹ to religious education (which presents religions as an objective phenomenon to be examined or observed by students from a safe distance, without engagement or commitment). It made clear that *'The students' own experience of religion and their commitment to a particular tradition, and/or to a continuing search for meaning, will therefore be encouraged and supported'* (Syllabus p.4). As such, the syllabus sought to facilitate teaching and learning *about* religion and *from* religion so that students could learn *from* religion for their lives as well as *about* religion as an academic subject.¹²

Religious Education as part of a state curriculum can be summarised as:

educating 'about' and 'from' religion in the school context as a timetabled subject in which the curriculum is defined by a State agency (either alone or in partnership with communities of faith and/or communities of conviction), forms the basis of a 'common programme' taught at the same time to all pupils (of all religious faiths and none) as part of the school day, which is inspected by the relevant State authority, which uses the traditions of more than one

¹¹ The phenomenological approach to religious education emerged in the late 20th century in non-confessional contexts in the UK. It emphasises a so-called objective, descriptive and non-evaluative study of observable expressions of a religion.

¹² Within faith-based schools, Guidelines were developed to enable teachers to teach *for* religion and so continue to engage in faith formation, alongside teaching the State syllabus. See for example, Irish Bishops Conference, *Guidelines for the Faith Formation and Development of Catholic Students: Junior Certificate Religious Education Syllabus* (Dublin, Veritas, 1999)

*faith community as learning resources, and which, while seeking to be respectful of all faiths, does not seek to promote any single faith.*¹³

The approach advocated in the NCCA [Guidelines for Teachers](#)¹⁴ reinforces the principle that religious education is not just focused on learning about religions, it is also about critical engagement leading to the development of skills, attitudes and dispositions needed for living as a thoughtful, respectful and reflective citizen in a pluralist society. As such, religious education is informative and formative.

2.3. The Junior Certificate Religious Education Syllabus (2000)

The Junior Certificate Religious Education syllabus was introduced on a phased basis in 2000. Students from fifty schools sat the first Junior Certificate examination in Religious Education in June 2003.

The rationale for the 2000 Junior Certificate Religious Education syllabus situates Religious Education as contributing to the human search for meaning as well as developing young peoples' appreciation and understanding of a variety of religious traditions. *The aim of Junior Cycle Religious Education is to provide students with a framework for encountering and engaging with the variety of religious traditions in Ireland and elsewhere.* (Syllabus, p.4) In addition it states, *Religious Education should ensure that students are exposed to a broad range of religious traditions and to the non-religious interpretation of life.* (Syllabus, p. 4) That said, the syllabus places special emphasis on learning about Christianity and states that the course makes particular reference to the Christian tradition, acknowledging the unique role of this tradition and its denominational expressions in Irish life.

The role of Religious Education in promoting tolerance and mutual understanding is affirmed as well as the role it can play '*as part of preparation for the responsibilities of citizenship*'. Furthermore, the course seeks to develop students' skills of reflection, critical thinking, understanding and moral decision-making.

The **aims** of Junior Certificate Religious Education are set out as follows:

- To foster an awareness that the human search for meaning is common to all peoples, of all ages and at all times

¹³ Andrew McGrady, 'Teaching Religion: Challenges and opportunities for educational practice within a pluralist context' in *Toward Mutual Ground*, ed. by Gareth Byrne and Patricia Kieran (Columba Press, 2013) p. 83.

¹⁴ *Religious Education Junior Certificate Guidelines for Teachers*, NCCA/DES, 2001.

- To explore how this search for meaning has found, and continues to find, expression in religion
- To identify how understandings of God, religious traditions, and in particular the Christian tradition, have contributed to the culture in which we live, and continue to have an impact on personal life-style, inter-personal relationships and relationships between individuals and their communities and contexts
- To appreciate the richness of religious traditions and to acknowledge the non-religious interpretation of life
- To contribute to the spiritual and moral development of the student. (Syllabus p.5)

The syllabus is built around a framework of knowledge, skills and attitudes and the content is organised in two parts:

- PART 1 Students study **any two** of the following:
- Section A Communities of Faith
- Section B Foundations of Religion – Christianity
- Section C Foundations of Religion – Major World Religions

- PART 2 Students study **all** of the following:
- Section D The Question of Faith
- Section E The Celebration of Faith
- Section F The Moral Challenge

Each section is set out with a set of aims, objectives, key concepts and a description of content.

As well as studying five sections, as set out above, students undertake journal work and reflect on it by completing a pro-forma booklet issued by the State Examinations Commission (SEC). Students select from a list of twelve titles issued each year – two for each section of the syllabus. Journal work contributes twenty per cent to the final mark. In undertaking journal work students are permitted to work in groups or undertake a visit or investigation as a whole class. However, each student must complete and submit an individual Journal booklet for assessment.

Journal work aims to

- facilitate a variety of teaching and learning methods
- promote the development of skills in research, analysis, drawing conclusions, presentation, etc.
- afford the students the opportunity to encounter religion as part of life

- facilitate the exploration of an area of personal interest or concern to the student. (Syllabus p.46)

The terminal written examination is two hours long at both Ordinary Level and Higher Levels. The syllabus states:

*'The assessment of Religious Education will be based on the objectives relating to knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes within each section of the course. While students will draw on their own experience in an examination, their personal faith commitment and/or affiliation to a particular grouping will not be subject to assessment for national certification.'*¹⁵

The table below presents the number of students taking the examination in Junior Certificate RE.

Year	Total number of Junior Certificate students	Number of students who sat the Religious Education exam	Percentage
2008	54,940	24,508	44%
2009	55,557	25,016	45%
2010	56,086	25,930	46%
2011	56,930	26,845	47%
2012	58,798	28,605	49%
2013	59,822	28,850	48%
2014	60,327	28,598	47%
2015	59,522	27,408	46%
2016	60,248	27,328	45%

Table 1: Uptake of Religious Education at Junior Certificate

Table 1 indicates that the take-up for Junior Certificate Religious Education has been consistent over the years, with almost half of Junior Certificate candidates taking the RE exam. Statistics from the SEC show that the number of candidates taking Ordinary Level is consistently approximately 5,500 students – one in four students during the early years and more recently approximately one in five. The gap between the number of boys and girls taking the subject is less marked but more girls do take the subject. We also know that a significant number of students study the Junior Certificate RE syllabus (or parts of it) without doing the examination. This may be due to the use of textbooks that follow the syllabus.

¹⁵ *Junior Certificate: Religious Education Syllabus, p. 45.*

2.4. Links with primary school and Leaving Certificate Religious Education

Religious Education in the Primary School Curriculum

Religious Education (RE) is one of 12 subjects in the 1999 Primary School Curriculum. It holds a unique position in that the responsibility for providing a programme of RE rests with the patrons and not the State. The rights of the different patrons to design programmes in Religious Education and to supervise their teaching and implementation are noted. The position of RE is also unique in that it is the only curriculum subject that requires a daily amount of instruction time (Education Act, 1998, section 32b). The Introduction to the Primary School Curriculum offers the following rationale for inclusion of RE in the primary curriculum:

*The spiritual dimension is a fundamental aspect of individual experience, and its religious and cultural expression is an inextricable part of Irish culture and history. Religious education specifically enables the child to develop spiritual and moral values and to come to a knowledge of God.*¹⁶

However, the curriculum does not limit the child's spiritual development to his/her engagement with RE alone. The curriculum notes that the importance attributed to the child's spiritual development is also expressed through the breadth of learning experiences outlined, and through the child's engagement with the aesthetic and affective domains of learning.¹⁷

In recent years NCCA have been involved in the development of proposals for a curriculum in Education about Religions, Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics. ERB and Ethics is the state's first attempt to develop a broad religious education curriculum for primary schools and is a key part of government's commitment to supporting greater inclusion and diversity in primary schools. A consultation on proposals for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics, began on November 3rd, 2015 and finished on March 31st, 2016. During this time, NCCA received a record number of responses, highlighting public interest in developments in this area of education. The consultation highlighted support for the inclusion of learning that relates to ERB and Ethics in the primary curriculum such as fostering skills, dispositions, knowledge and understandings of religions, beliefs and ethics that enable children to engage positively with the world in which they live; respect for those from other traditions; and the development of meaningful relationships with their peers. Several contextual factors also emerged which directly impact on what had been proposed in ERB and Ethics. These include the provision of the Education Act (1998) in relation to the rights of the patron body, the structure of the primary

¹⁶ Department of Education and Science, *Introduction to the Primary School Curriculum* (1999), p. 58.

¹⁷ *Primary School Curriculum*, p. 27.

education system – with 96% of schools under denominational patronage, and schools’ experience of curriculum overload and the associated challenges of teaching and learning across the whole primary curriculum¹⁸. Given the contextual factors outlined as well as developments on the structure and time allocation in a redeveloped primary school curriculum (<http://ncca.ie/en/Conference/Time-and-Structure/>), the work on ERB and Ethics will continue in the context of wider curriculum development in primary education in the coming years.

Leaving Certificate Religious Education

The Leaving Certificate Religious Education syllabus, introduced in 2003, affirms the five general aims of religious education laid out in the Junior Certificate Religious Education syllabus. It sets out a robust rationale for the inclusion of religious education in the curriculum.

*The history of humanity has been indelibly marked by the contributions of religious traditions. In Ireland, Christianity is part of our rich cultural heritage and has played a significant role in shaping our vision of ourselves, our world, and our relationships with others. However, effective functioning in an increasingly complex culture demands that individuals have an understanding of a variety of religious traditions, and an appreciation of the richness of the major religious traditions encountered not just in Ireland, but in Europe and the wider global context. Increasingly, modern culture also calls for engagement with the secular response to human experience.*¹⁹

The syllabus states that Religious Education ‘has a particular role to play in the curriculum in the promotion of tolerance and mutual understanding.’²⁰ The importance of critical enquiry is also stressed. ‘The student who pursues this course of study must assume the roles of critical questioner and reflective searcher.’²¹

The course is organised around ten sections. Students must study five sections in depth, including Section A – **The search for meaning and values**, which is compulsory. Any two from Unit Two are studied: **Christianity: origins and contemporary expressions**, **World religions**, and **Moral decision-making**. Two sections from Unit three are studied, one of which is designated for coursework by the DES. These are: **Religion and Gender**, **Issues of justice and peace**, **Worship, prayer and ritual**, **The Bible: literature and sacred text**, **Religion: the Irish experience**, and **Religion and science**. Each of

¹⁸ www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe

¹⁹ Department of Education and Science, *Leaving Certificate Religious Education Syllabus*, (Dublin: The Stationery Office, 2003), p.3.

²⁰ Leaving Certificate Religious Education Syllabus, p. 3.

²¹ Leaving Certificate Religious Education Syllabus, p. 4.

the five sections chosen for study, whether as part of coursework or for the final examination, is awarded 20% of the final mark.

The take-up of Religious Education at Leaving Certificate level is small, fluctuating between 2% and 2.5% of all Leaving Certificate students. In its work the development group for Religious Education may wish to consider why almost 50% of students complete Junior Certificate Religious Education and such a small number progress to study the Leaving Certificate equivalent.

Table 2 Number of students examined in Leaving Certificate Religious Education 2010-2016

Year	Number of students taking LC Religious Education	Total number of candidates	Percentage
2010	962	54,480	1.8%
2011	1,085	54,344	2.0%
2012	1,186	52,592	2.3%
2013	1,280	52,767	2.4%
2014	1,221	54,026	2.2%
2015	1,167	55,045	2.2%
2016	1,320	53,838	2.5%

Section Summary

The introduction of Junior Certificate Religious Education as an examination subject marked a major development in the evolution of the subject. The 2000 syllabus is grounded in a holistic understanding of the student. It affirms the role that religious education can play in providing a space for dialogue and engagement with questions of meaning as well as developing young peoples' appreciation and understanding of a variety of religious traditions and non-religious worldviews. It facilitates learning *about* religion (in an academic manner) and *from* religion (finding wisdom for one's own life). As a state syllabus, the course is inclusive of students of all faith backgrounds as well as students of other convictions and beliefs. Currently almost 50% of Junior Certificate students take RE as an examination subject. The development group will consider to what degree the rationale, aspirations and aims of the syllabus remain relevant today and can inform the new specification.

3. The experience of Junior Certificate Religious Education

Before considering the content of a new Religious Education specification, it is useful to explore the experiences of students, teachers, and others in relation to the current syllabus. In the absence of published research which relates directly to the experience of Junior Certificate Religious Education this section seeks to provide some insights into the implementation of the current syllabus. To this end, it is useful to consider the SEC Chief Examiner's Report, findings from Inspection reports from the Department of Education and Skills, and the views of teachers and students based on some recent focus group meetings and surveys conducted by the NCCA.

3.1. SEC and DES reports

A Chief Examiner's Report for Religious Education was published in 2008. While this Report was based on a single examination and is now almost ten years old, it does offer some useful observations. It concluded that the majority of candidates who sat the Ordinary Level examination '*coped very well with the demands of the examination*' and '*showed a good knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the syllabus objectives being assessed.*'²² Sometimes students showed a lack of understanding of commonly used question cues such as 'describe', 'explain', 'outline' etc. that are used in the examination paper. Similarly, some candidates who sat the Higher Level examination did not appear to be familiar with the meaning of question cues such as 'describe' or 'profile' and some did not appear to be familiar with concepts and terminology related to the course such as 'vocation' and 'ritual'. The question on world religions in Section 4 of the examination paper was the least popular choice of question among OL candidates (42% response rate) with a higher number of HL candidates doing this question (59%). Overall, Examiners noted very good candidate responses in the written examination paper and Journal work.

In reviewing a sample of twenty inspection reports for Religious Education valuable observations and recommendations can be gleaned. It appears from the reports that there was good support for the subject within schools and Religious Education had an important place in the school curriculum. In most schools the subject was given the time allocation recommended for junior cycle subjects.

²² State Examinations Commission, *Junior Certificate Examination 2008, Religious Education, Chief Examiner's Report*, p. 17

Resources for the teaching of R.E., including ICT were generally very good. There was evidence of good collaborative planning and in most cases, teachers of R.E. as an examination subject had specialist qualifications in the subject. Reports showed that most classes were mixed ability with students learning effectively together. Students demonstrated a good knowledge of the key concepts underpinning the Religious Education course at both higher and ordinary levels.

While the reports describe many examples of effective pair and group work the dominant teaching strategy appears to be whole-class work with the teacher taking the lead in framing class questioning and class discussion. Teachers used questions frequently throughout the lessons observed both to engage students and to check their understanding of the topics being discussed. In some lessons, students were provided with opportunities to both demonstrate their knowledge and to give their personal views, supported by reasons and examples. In others, however, insufficient 'wait time' was provided and opportunities for students to express, clarify and extend their knowledge and understanding of topics orally were missed.

Many reports recommended providing more opportunities for the development of students' critical thinking and reflection skills to allow students to develop an informed and critical understanding of the topics. They also identified scope for further development of experiential learning opportunities. While some lessons observed, provided opportunities for students to engage with the topics and relate them to their own experiences, more opportunities for students to think through topics for themselves were recommended, along with opportunities to reflect on what they are learning.

The reports surveyed also point to a need for greater attention to developing oral communication skills within the R.E. class. In addition, teachers were advised to use questioning techniques to prompt reflection and higher order thinking. Short answer, lower order questioning tended to dominate both in classroom questioning and homework tasks. Extension activities such as debating, evaluating, comparing and contrasting, and analysing were recommended.

In most schools, it appeared that a linear approach to teaching the syllabus was adopted. In many schools, Inspectors noted that the chronology of the text book determined the order in which topics were studied. In this context, schools were advised that care should be taken to ensure that the syllabus and the needs of the students, rather than the textbooks used in class, should be the deciding factor in planning a scheme of work.

When it comes to assessment, teachers were widely praised for their setting and correction of homework and giving class tests for the purposes of revision. It was suggested that students should

be encouraged to develop their understanding and critical skills through the setting of assessment tasks that would facilitate reflection and developed thought.

3.2. Teachers' views

For the purposes of this paper, a focus group meeting was held with eight experienced R.E. teachers in May 2017. The teachers came from diverse school settings. The discussion was framed around three key questions – What's good about the current syllabus? What needs to change? What are your hopes for a new specification?

What's good about the current syllabus?

Teachers like the fact that the R.E. class provides an opportunity to relate to students and get to know them in a different way than is sometimes possible when teaching other subjects. They like the opportunities that the syllabus provides to engage at a deeper level with questions of meaning for young people. However, they also noted that the amount of content to be covered militates against exploiting the opportunities for questioning, discussion and reflection. As one teacher put it *'When they (students) pose a good question, there isn't time to follow through.'*

Teachers also like the fact that the current syllabus is adaptable to a school context and ethos, a feature which they consider to be very important. The teachers agreed that the syllabus exposes students to a range of religious traditions and perspectives which they regard as increasingly important in a more multicultural Ireland. In this context, they believe that the current syllabus has helped in the promotion of respect and mutual understanding. Teachers also agreed that the study of Junior Certificate R.E. develops students' religious literacy and their understanding of core concepts related to the subject.

When it comes to topics that students enjoy, they agreed that students have a great interest in learning about different religions and like learning about inspirational people such as Martin Luther King, Gandhi and organisations, such as St Vincent De Paul.

Teachers agree that the journal work is worthwhile and students generally enjoy undertaking the journal work. However, they are critical of the process of writing up the journal booklet and concur that the format of the booklet and the questions/prompts present difficulties for many students. They observed that while students generally engage well with the journal work they often struggle to write it up. Teachers talked about coaching the students on how to write up the journal to get optimal marks. One teacher said, *'Once I learned how the marking works it killed creativity.'*

What needs to change?

The teacher focus group was in agreement that there is too much in the course and it needs to be pared back to facilitate time for deeper thinking and classroom dialogue. They concurred that there was too much focus on the learning of facts and definitions and not enough scope for student-centred and enquiry-based learning. They would like to see more emphasis on developing thinking skills, including the skills of philosophical enquiry and questioning. *'Students need to be allowed to ask the 'so what?' question and link religious questions to the real world.'* The teachers would like to see the course being framed around students' question such as 'what happens when we die?' *'We're not giving them the time to talk about these things'*.

Similarly, they felt that the language of the examination is overly theological and the questions are *'too factual and definition-based'*. One teacher commented, *'You could answer all the questions but still have little understanding.'* They also suggested that the language of the examination paper is difficult and questions don't allow students to showcase what they know. *'It favours the academic child and other students are alienated when they see the exam questions. Many of students are put off R.E. by the exam.'*

Teachers in the focus group suggested that the course needs to be flexible enough to facilitate schools which differ greatly in terms of school ethos and diversity of students' backgrounds. In this regard, teachers pointed to the need for a specification what would balance teaching about Christianity and teaching about other religions, as well as non-religious perspectives and world-views. Some of the teachers' comments on this included:

The course presupposes faith! It should not be an assumption or prerequisite.

The course should facilitate students who have faith and allow them to be nourished but equally allow those who don't belong to a religious tradition to engage.

While the teachers agreed that section A of the current syllabus on Community fits in very well with first year and allows for cross-curricular links they questioned whether this topic is now needed as part of a new R.E. programme as students also engage in this topic through SPHE and CSPE. They suggested that the new specification might include a strand called 'foundations of religion' or 'the origins of religion' which would look at the ways in which people have expressed their search for meaning over time. This would also allow students to make connections with their own search for meaning and with contemporary expressions of religion and faith, for example, through music, the arts and popular culture.

While the teachers agreed on the importance of the topic of morality, they said that this section of the syllabus (Section F) is often rushed, coming at the end of an already over-crowded course, and due to its overemphasis on theory, students find it boring. However, they agreed that this topic had great potential to be reframed around questions which would connect with students' interests and with contemporary real-world issues. Similarly, they suggested Section D, The Question of Faith, could benefit from '*going beyond the usual suspects*' to discuss other examples of people who connect faith and action and it could also encourage practical learning through engagement in social justice/active citizenship/sustainable development. The teachers would like to see more opportunities for learning outside of the classroom. Some said their students didn't like Section E, The Celebration of Faith, as it's too long and students don't see a connection to their lives. Finally, a small number of the teachers suggested that the relationship between science and religion and how religion impacts on society and politics would be topics worth considering in a new specification.

What are teachers' hopes for a new specification?

The teachers who participated in the focus group shared a range of hopes regarding what the new specification might achieve. In summary, the teachers hoped that the course would *provide a space for students to address the big questions - questions about who we are as humans and the meaning and purpose of life; enable students to form their own opinions and become critical and independent thinkers; promote tolerance, respect and a spirit of care based on our shared humanity, and help students develop the spiritual aspect of their lives and a sense of wonder.*

3.3. Student Voice

The Student Voice project involves eliciting the perspectives of students in a number of post-primary schools on developments in curriculum and assessment. The purpose of the project is to consult students as experts on their own experience of learning and to incorporate their insights in this opportunity for curriculum development. The project has gathered student reaction and input in respect of a range of curriculum documents to date.

Focus group meetings were held with four groups of 3rd and 4th year students across different schools during April/May 2017. Students were selected to participate with the aim of ensuring that a range of abilities and backgrounds were represented in each group. All groups discussed the same questions:

- What do/did you like learning in the current junior cycle R.E. syllabus?
- What do/did you not like? What needs to change?
- What do you think of the journal work and the written examination?
- At the end of three years, what do you think students should gain from studying R.E.?

What students like

It was clear that the students who participated in the focus groups had a positive experience of Junior Certificate R.E and see the value of it in the curriculum²³. They pointed to a range of topics that they like. All students said they like learning about world religions and wished they could have done more in this area. They articulated very clearly why they felt this was an important part of the course, referring to the need for greater understanding of different religions in the world today. They felt that the study of R.E. had helped them to gain respect and understanding for different beliefs and cultures. For this reason, many students saw Religious Education as an important part of the curriculum. One student said, *'It's important to take religion even if you don't believe yourself.'* Another said, *'you might not be a Catholic or a Muslim but it's important to learn about different religions.'* They would like to see the new course allowing for a greater focus on a range of world religions and on minority faiths and non-religious world-views.

Some students expressed appreciation that Religious Education had allowed them to discuss the origins of different forms of religious extremism and they now felt better able to recognise distortions of religion. They referred to the rise of Islamophobia and the role that Religious Education can play in countering prejudice and misunderstanding.

Many students felt that morality is really interesting and useful because *'in the future we're going to be faced with choices'* and because *'it gives me another view on life... it makes me a better person.'* Students like when they are given an opportunity to discuss controversial topics such as *'abortion or euthanasia'* and *'questions on life and why I'm here'*.

²³ This is mirrored in research which found high levels of support for teaching religious education in schools amongst 13-15 year old female student in Ireland and Scotland. Francis, L., Byrne, G., Sweetman, B. & Penny, G. (2016). *Growing up female and Catholic in the Republic of Ireland and Scotland: The intersectionality of religious identity, religious saliency, and nationality* in L. J. Francis and J. Astley (Eds.), *Diversity and intersectionality: Studies in religion, education, and values*. Oxford, 2016, p 86.

Students also like when their teachers connect the topics with the student's lives and needs. For example, one group said they liked when their teacher taught them how to meditate *'because this is something that could benefit us for the rest of our lives.'* Students from minority faiths (such as Greek Orthodox and Muslim students) said they like when they have an opportunity to talk about their beliefs in class. Many students also said they liked *'the way the course didn't just focus on people of faith but also focused on people how didn't have faith or weren't sure of their faith'.*

What students don't like

While most students said they liked doing the tasks associated with the journal work they didn't like writing up the journal with one student observing *'you don't learn anything from that.'* Most students said they would like greater freedom to pursue a topic of interest to them, rather than being restricted to set titles issued by the State Examination Commission (SEC). When it came to the written examination, they thought the wording of some questions was difficult and vague. Students talked about being *'unsure what they are looking for'* and writing as much as they could in the hope that something was relevant.

Students noted that there was some repetition of content across the different sections of the course which they found boring. They also felt the topic of Community was not needed as it overlaps with other subjects.

Many students commented on the need for a greater balance between Christian and non-Christian perspectives. They perceived the course to be *'overloaded with Christianity'* and *'biased and assumes everyone is a Christian'*. When probed, they agreed that this perception was mainly due to the emphasis of the textbooks.

What would they like in a new course?

Most students said they would like to learn about a wider variety of religions instead of just learning about Christianity and one other world religion. They said that not only would they like to learn about a wider range of religions and beliefs but they would like to study them more deeply too. *'When we study a world religion it's done differently – done very superficially and we just learn off the key facts'.*

Some students said they would like more opportunities to examine *'philosophical questions'* and thought this could be an interesting topic within a new course. They would also like more

opportunities for discussion of current topics within the media that relate to religion. In this context, some students suggested they should learn also about the origins of conflict between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland and also about religious conflict elsewhere, such as in the middle East.

When it comes to journal work, students would like greater freedom to choose a topic of real interest to them and suggested they should be allowed present it in a choice of formats.

Students would also like the new course to allow for more active learning including learning outside the classroom. *'We should be doing more charity work instead of learning from a book'. 'It would be good to go on outings to the Interfaith forum or other places'.*

At the end of three years, what do you think students should gain from studying R.E.?

When asked what is the important learning that students should gain through three years of study of Religious Education students were very articulate in their responses, which included:

- How religion functions
- How to debate challenging questions
- How to think for yourself
- Respect and understanding for other religions
- Better understanding of the world and be able to speak out and have an opinion on things
- How to become a better person and know more about yourself too
- It should open your eyes and make you think about things more
- Help answer a few questions on life like why I'm here
- So many skills, like being able to reflect on yourself
- We need to learn it's not just about faith it's about society too.

The ideas presented by the students were rich and varied and will help to inform the future subject specification for Junior Cycle Religious Education. It is planned that NCCA will return to these schools and students as the specification is developed in order to get further feedback.

Section Summary

The SEC and DES Reports observe that students demonstrate a good knowledge of the key concepts of the course. Inspectors observed that skills of critical thinking, reflection and dialogue could be developed further to enable a more informed and critical understanding of the subject. Teachers who participated in an NCCA focus group concurred with this observation and said that the amount of content in the syllabus makes it difficult to fully pursue opportunities for questioning, discussion and reflection.

Teachers and students both agree that the syllabus has helped develop respect and mutual understanding of different religions and world views and this is seen as very important in today's world. They would like the new specification to provide greater opportunities for learning about religions and beliefs beyond Christianity. They would also like the new specification to provide opportunities for critical thinking and enquiry on matters of relevance and interest to the students. Both students and teachers agree that while the journal work is useful and enjoyable, writing it up in the booklet is often formulaic and of little benefit to the learning.

The development group will consider the experience and views of students and teachers in developing the new specification. The development group will consider how the emphasis on learning about different religions and beliefs can be maintained and enhanced while also recognising non-religious perspectives and world-views; how the specification can be made relevant to students' lives and questions; and how it can promote an enquiring, thoughtful, critical and reflective approach to the study of R.E.

4. Religious Education – A European perspective

‘The involvement of the religions in the religious education of their adherents has a long, well documented history and a clearly articulated rationale, whereas religious education itself is only beginning to emerge as a concern of the public sphere.’²⁴

In every context, religious education occurs within a State’s overall understanding of education and its particular social and historical contexts determine the shape of the provision. Internationally, debates about religious education in schools focus on its status and purpose in schools as well as its aims, objectives, methodologies, resources and methods of assessment.

Most European states provide religious education in publicly funded schools, though the form that this provision takes varies across Europe. In general, religious education is based on educational principles in accordance with the dominant educational philosophy of individual states and religious education in school is distinct from religious nurture outside school.

Schreiner identifies three basic forms of provision across Europe: (i) Teaching organised by religious communities with exclusive responsibility for religious education – confessional approach, (ii) Teaching organised in collaboration between State authorities and religious communities – can support a confessional approach, (iii) Teaching organised exclusively by State authorities – non-confessional approach.²⁵ Regardless of the approach taken, it is possible to discern a number of convergences in the provision of religious education across European systems.

Common objectives in most syllabi include:

- to encourage pupils to be sensitive to religion and the religious dimension of life,
- to provide orientation among the variety of existing religious traditions and worldviews, including non-religious convictions
- to provide knowledge and understanding of religious beliefs and experiences.²⁶

Since 2002, the debate in Europe about the place of religion within education has been spearheaded by the Council of Europe. The recent growth of social, cultural and religious tensions in many

²⁴ Sandra Cullen, Interpreting ‘between privacies’: Religious education as a conversational activity’ in *Does Religious Education Matter?* ed. by Mary Shanahan (London: Routledge, 2017),

²⁵ Peter Schreiner, ‘Religious Education in a European Context’, *Hungarian Educational Research Journal*, 2013, pp. 5-15.

²⁶ Schreiner, p. 10.

European countries has highlighted the need to create more tolerant, mutually respectful societies where people are able to live together in increasingly diverse social settings. It is not surprising that the role that R.E. can play in promoting intercultural understanding and respect for diverse beliefs is now a focus of policy makers in Europe and beyond. In 2005 the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe recommended:

*a good general knowledge of religions and the resulting sense of tolerance are essential to the exercise of democratic citizenship...Knowledge of religions is an integral part of knowledge of the history of mankind and civilizations. It is altogether distinct from belief in a specific religion and its observance.*²⁷

Recommendation 1720(6) also called on Governments to

do more to guarantee freedom of conscience and religious expression, to encourage religious instruction, to promote dialogue with and between religions, and to further the cultural and social expression of religions’.

In 2007, the European ministers of education declared that *‘regardless of the religious education system that exists in a particular country, children must receive tuition that takes account of religious and philosophical diversity as part of their intercultural education.’*²⁸

Interest within the Council of Europe in the role that R.E. can play in nurturing understanding of religious diversity for all young Europeans, regardless of their background, is also evident in the *Recommendation CM/Rec (2008) 12 On the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education*. These recommendations point out that:

1. Intercultural dialogue is a pre-condition for the development of tolerance in Europe.
2. There should be respect for the rights of individuals to hold religious belief
3. Teaching about religious and non-religious convictions is consistent with the aims of education for a democratic citizenship
4. Promoting dialogue between people from different cultural, religious and non-religious convictions is important for schooling
5. Respecting the dignity of everyone and promoting mutual trust and understanding is important for education in the twenty-first century.²⁹

²⁷ Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Recommendation 1720 (2005) on education and religion

²⁸ Final declaration (paragraph 23) of the 22nd session of the Permanent Conference of European ministers of education, Istanbul, May 2007

²⁹ Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)12 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education

In its work on competences for democratic culture the Council of Europe again reiterates the potential role of R.E. in contributing to social cohesion, intercultural understanding and democracy. As the religious face of Europe continues to evolve the Council is '*concerned with teaching young people how to think, in order to navigate a world where not everyone holds their views, but we each have a duty to uphold the democratic principles which allow all cultures to co-exist.*'³⁰

The Council of Europe situates its policies on teaching about religions and non-religious convictions within its work on intercultural education, human rights education and education for democratic citizenship. It understands religion as a cultural fact and social practice but does not reduce religion to culture. Interpreting religion as a social practice allows the Council to include religious education as part of its remit.

As articulated in *Signposts – Policy and Practice for teaching about religions and non-religious worldviews in intercultural education*,³¹ (2014) the Council's work does not just promote teaching about religions, it also promotes the development of attitudes such as sensitivity and respect for religious and non-religious convictions, as well as competences such as literacy and understanding. *Signposts* also opens up for discussion many of the contested areas concerning religious education in schools – the contested use of terminology, stereotyping of religions, education and extremism, discrimination on the grounds of belief, the internal diversity of religions, religions as distinct phenomena, dealing with truth claims in a classroom, media representations of religions and creating a 'safe space' for dialogue in a diverse classroom.

Work undertaken by the Office for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) with the ODIHR in producing the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (2007) is also noteworthy. These *Guidelines*, which are for public schools without a denominational ethos, situate teaching about religion in the context of a human rights framework and a commitment to religious freedom and are most usefully seen as providing minimum criteria for the

³⁰ Council of Europe, *Competences for Democratic Culture: Living together as equals in culturally diverse democratic societies* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2016), p. 7.

³¹ Council of Europe, *Signposts – Policy and Practice for teaching about religions and non-religious worldviews in intercultural education* (2014)

provision of teaching religion in order to promote democratic citizenship, mutual understanding and the common good.³² The two core principles underpinning the document are:

- (i) there is positive value in teaching that emphasises respect for everyone's right to freedom of religion and belief,
- (ii) teaching about religions and beliefs is important for understanding literature, culture, one's own particular religion, and therefore should be part of the school curriculum.

Intersecting with these developments in religious education in public schools are various developments in denominational religious education across Europe. In many instances, religious education in publically funded schools is informed by the particular religious ethos of the school and responds to the theological underpinnings of that ethos.³³ In such cases, schools under the patronage of a faith community have to negotiate the aims of a State's Religious Education curricula in such a way as not to undermine their own educational aims and theological convictions.

Research in religious education that informs the specification

The *REDCo project*³⁴ (a three year EU funded research project 2006-2009) found that young people want an opportunity to learn about different religions and worldviews and talk about religion in school. This does not necessarily equate to a desire to be personally affiliated to a religious community. The research undertaken with 14-16 year olds in eight European countries revealed a number of general trends:

- Students wish for peaceful coexistence across differences, and believe this to be possible. This peaceful coexistence depends on knowledge about each other's religions and world views and on sharing common interests/doing things together
- Students who learn about religious diversity in school are more willing to have conversations about religions/beliefs with students of other backgrounds than those who do not

³² Andrew McGrady, 'Teaching Religion: Challenges and opportunities for educational practice within a pluralist context' in *Toward Mutual Ground*, ed by Gareth Byrne and Patricia Kieran (Columba Press, 2013), p. 87.

³³ For a more comprehensive discussion about the complex provision of Religious Education in European states see Martin Rothgangel, Robert Jackson and Martin Jäggle (eds) *Religious Education at Schools in Europe* (Vienna: Vienna University Press, 2014).

³⁴ The international research project REDCo (Religion in Education. A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries) addressed the question of how religions and values contribute to dialogue or tension in Europe. Students in the 14-16 year age group from 8 European countries participated in this empirical study. Wolfram Weisse, 'Reflections on the REDCo Project', *British Journal of Religious Education*, 33/2 (2011) pp. 111-125.

- Students did not think that studying other religious and non-religious views eroded their own beliefs
- The most important source of information about religions and worldviews was generally the family, followed by the school
- Some religiously-committed students feel vulnerable in the classroom
- Students wish to avoid conflict and want learning to take place in a safe classroom environment where there are agreed procedures for expression and discussion
- Students want teachers to provide accurate information and manage discussions which include significant differences in viewpoint
- Most students would like school to be a place for learning about different religions/worldviews, rather than for instruction into a particular religion/worldview (respondents tended to support the system of which they had personal experience).³⁵

The REDCo Project identified a number of key priorities for the R.E. classroom: facilitating respectful dialogue in the classroom, establishing classrooms as ‘safe spaces’ for dialogue, engaging with competing truth claims, and helping young people to analyse media representations of religions. The project concluded that R.E. can make an important contribution to personal development, intercultural understanding, democracy and human rights.

Other research in Europe and Ireland echoes the finding that many young people value the place of religious education in schools and want an opportunity to learn and talk about religion and belief in schools. They see the classroom as a potential ‘safe space’ for this to happen, and they appreciate skilful teachers who can both provide accurate information and manage discussions, which include significant differences in viewpoint, including secular humanism and other non-religious philosophies.

The data from the ‘Ireland: Growing up Irish: Life perspectives among young people in the Republic of Ireland’ research provided evidence of the continuing and active role of religion within contemporary Irish society, but also how religious expression is adapting.³⁶

³⁵ Jackson, in *Toward Mutual Ground*, p. 53. See also Elisabeth Arweck, ed. *Young People’s Attitudes to Religious Diversity* (London: Routledge, 2017).

The research demonstrated that:

*'Just as the young people wish to explore other religions through dialogue, they wish to critically discuss issues for themselves in their own faith. These sophisticated young people will not accept religion blindly, rather they will undertake intellectual investigation, and refine, reject, and redevelop their ideas.'*³⁷

This understanding of the agency of the young person is highlighted by a growing body of research findings which suggest that, *'even young children do not necessarily adopt their parents' beliefs uncritically and develop a personalised sense of religion and belief in interaction with, but not determined by, their family and school context.'*³⁸

The views of students and teachers in Ireland, outlined in section 3.2 and 3.3 above, suggests that students value the opportunities for space to reflect on their own spiritual and moral development. This is mirrored in international research which suggests that *'spiritual development is an active process among the majority of youth across diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, with most having spiritual development unfold without particularly strong engagement in explicitly religious or spiritual practices'*.³⁹

³⁶ Christopher Lewis, Sharon Cruise, Michael Fearn, & Conor Mc Guckin, (2009) "Ireland: Growing up Irish: Life perspectives among young people in the Republic of Ireland" in Hans-Georg Ziebertz.& William Kay (eds), *Youth in Europe I: An international empirical study about life perspectives* (2nd Edition), (Münster, Germany, LIT, 2009), pp. 151-164.

³⁷ Conor Mc Guckin, Christopher Lewis, John-Paul Sheridan, & Sharon Cruise, 'The religious socialisation of young people in Ireland', in James O'Higgins-Norman, *Education matters: Readings in pastoral care for school chaplains, guidance counsellors and teachers* (Dublin, Veritas, 2014), pp. 228 - 245,

³⁸ Merike Darmody and Emer Smyth, 'Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics Views of Teachers, Parents and the General Public Regarding the Proposed Curriculum for Primary Schools Consultation Paper Prepared for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment' (NCCA, 2017).

³⁹ Peter Benson, Peter Scales, Amy Syvertsen and Eugene Roehlkepartain, 'Is youth spiritual development a universal developmental process? An international exploration', *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, Vol. 7/6, 2012. Mandy Robbins and Leslie Francis, 'The Teenage Religion and Values Survey in England and Wales: an overview', *British Journal of Religious Education*, Vol. 32/3, 2010.

Section Summary

Most European states provide religious education in publicly funded schools, though the form that this provision takes varies across Europe. Since 2002, the debate in Europe about the place of religious education within the curriculum has been spearheaded by the Council of Europe which situates its policies on teaching about religions and non-religious convictions within its work on intercultural education, human rights education, and education for democratic citizenship. More recently the Council's work does not just promote teaching about religion, it also promotes the development of attitudes such as sensitivity and respect, as well as competences necessary for intercultural living. The Council of Europe sees religious education as having an important contribution to make in this regard.

Findings from a number of research projects across Europe agree that students and teachers see religious education having a role in:

- facilitating respectful dialogue in the classroom
- creating classrooms as 'safe spaces' for dialogue
- engaging with competing claims to truth
- helping young people analyse media representations of religions.

Research also shows that young people value the place of religious education in schools and want a safe space to learn and talk about their own and others' religions, beliefs and truth claims in schools. Furthermore, a growing body of research findings underscore the agency of the young person in negotiating their developing belief systems and spiritualities.

5. The context for a new specification

There are several interconnected societal influences or factors which must be considered in the context of re-visioning Religious Education at junior cycle. Some of these are directly related to the curriculum and others are of a more systemic nature. It is important that these are considered in the interest of ensuring relevancy of the new specification to the lives of individuals, families, communities and society.

This section of the paper highlights some of these interconnected influences and factors namely:

- The Junior Cycle Framework and student wellbeing
- Diversity of religious practices and beliefs
- The need for religious literacy in the public space
- The National Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development

The Junior Cycle Framework and student wellbeing

At the heart of junior cycle reform is a holistic vision of the learner who enjoys a broad range of learning experiences reflected in the 24 Statements of Learning. There is a balance between learning knowledge and developing the skills, knowledge, values and behaviours needed for learning and for life. Learning generates engagement and enthusiasm, and connects with students' lives.

Wellbeing is one of the eight principles that underpins the Framework for Junior Cycle and it is also a curricular area within the new junior cycle. This new area of learning incorporates learning traditionally included in PE, SPHE and CSPE as well as Guidance and elements of learning from other subjects/short courses. Religious Education is well placed to make a specific contribution to the spiritual and ethical wellbeing of students as it provides explicit opportunities for space to engage with as well as reflect on their own spiritual and moral development. As observed in 3.2 and 3.3 students and teachers see junior cycle Religious Education as a space where they can explore life's questions, learn more about themselves and others and learn how to become a better person.

The definition of wellbeing set out in the Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines states

*Student wellbeing is present when students realise their abilities, take care of their physical wellbeing, can cope with the normal stresses of life, and have a sense of purpose and belonging the wider community.*⁴⁰

Religious Education can make an important contribution to supporting students' wellbeing, in particular developing their sense of meaning, personal awareness and connectedness to others. Within the RE classroom there are also ample opportunities for the development of the six indicators of wellbeing (students as active, responsible, connected, resilient, respected and aware) and these indicators will be supported both by the Learning Outcomes and by the teaching and learning methodologies of the new R.E. specification. While Religious Education will continue to maintain its own separate and distinctive identity within the curriculum, with careful planning some elements of the new specification might support a school's wellbeing programme.

Diversity of religious practice and beliefs

Recent CSO data shows that Ireland has changed from being a largely culturally homogenous society to one characterised by increasing diversity and this growth in cultural diversity has been accompanied by changing religious beliefs and practice.

The 2016 census reported that 17.3% of people resident in Ireland were born abroad.⁴¹ In April 2016, there were 535,475 'non-national' people from over 200 different nationalities living in Ireland. The 2016 results show that 612,018 residents spoke a foreign language at home (up 19 per cent from 514,068 in 2011). Polish was by far the most common language, followed by French, Romanian and Lithuanian.

While Ireland remains a predominantly Roman Catholic country, as illustrated in the table below, the percentage of the population who identified as Roman Catholic on the census has fallen from 84.2 per cent in 2011 to 78.3 per cent in 2016. There has also been a considerable increase of those identifying with the 'no religion' category, from 3.5 per cent in 2002 to 5.7 per cent in 2011 and to 9.8 per cent in 2016 (which amounts to 468,421 people)⁴². The fastest growing religions between 2011 and 2016 in percentage terms were Orthodox, Hindu and Muslim.

⁴⁰ Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines, NCCA, 2017

⁴¹ www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/population/2017/Chapter_5_Diversity.pdf

⁴² www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/population/2017/Chapter_8_Religion.pdf

Religion	2011	2016	Percentage change
<i>000s</i>			
Roman Catholic	3,861.3	3,729.1	-3.4
Church of Ireland	129.0	126.4	-2.0
Muslim (Islamic)	49.2	63.4	28.9
Orthodox	45.2	62.2	37.5
Christian	41.2	37.4	-9.1
Presbyterian	24.6	24.2	-1.6
Hindu	10.7	14.3	34.1
Apostolic or Pentecostal	14.0	13.4	-4.9
Other	70.2	97.7	39.1
No religion	269.8	468.4	73.6
Not stated	72.9	125.3	71.8
Total	4,588.3	4,761.9	3.8

Table 3 Population by religion⁴³

This increasing plurality has an obvious impact on how religious education is conceived of and taught within schools and has been the impetus for public discussion and consultation about the provision of religious education in various school types.

Some recent publications that both reflect and influence the public debate surrounding religious education in a more diverse Ireland are the Irish Human Rights Commission's *Religion and Education: A Human Rights Perspective* (2011), the *Report of the Advisory Group to the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector* (2012), the NCCA's *Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics in the Primary School: Consultation Paper* (2015), the follow up questionnaire report *Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics: Views of Teachers, Parents and the General Public Regarding the Proposed Curriculum for Primary Schools Consultation Paper* (Merike Darmody and Emer Smyth), January 2017⁴⁴ and the final report published by the NCCA in February 2017⁴⁵. Faith communities and secular voices have also engaged in this debate and published contributions.

⁴³ :www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/population/2017/Chapter_8_Religion.pdf

⁴⁴ <https://www.esri.ie/pubs/BKMNEXT324.pdf>

⁴⁵ www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe.

While it is not within the scope of this paper to discuss all the issues and debates reflected in these publications, it is important to acknowledge that questions regarding the kind of religious education appropriate for our young people today are hotly contested. The work of the development group will be cognisant of the diversity of school types and seek to develop a Religious Education specification that is responsive to the needs of all.

The need for religious literacy in the public space

Religious education has a role to play in developing religious literacy. At its most basic level, religious literacy is the ability to have informed, thoughtful and respectful conversations about religion and how it has influenced and is influenced by society and world events. This requires an understanding and fluency in the language and terminology of the religions.

The purpose of religious literacy is understanding; understanding that *'religions are internally diverse as opposed to uniform; religions evolve and change over time as opposed to being ahistorical and static; and religious influences are embedded in all dimensions of culture as opposed to the assumption that religions function in discrete, isolated, "private" contexts.'*⁴⁶ Understanding religions in all their complexities has the potential to contribute to developing understanding, respect and recognition of the rights of others. It also has the potential to develop sensitivity to and respect for the philosophical and/or theological principles underlying particular worldviews and thus a deeper appreciation of particular ways of being religious or non-religious.

In concrete terms, one important task of the R.E. classroom is to help students develop the language and skills needed for dialogue, thus contributing to greater understanding and helping young people see beyond stereotyped and polarised portrayals of religion.

⁴⁶ Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis, (eds) *Religious literacy in policy and practice* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015), p. 28.

National Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development

The National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland (2014-2020), Education for Sustainability⁴⁷, provides a framework to support the contribution of the education sector to a more sustainable future.

The National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development aims to ensure that education contributes to sustainable development by equipping learners with the relevant knowledge (the 'what'), the key dispositions and skills (the 'how') and the values (the 'why') that will motivate and empower them throughout their lives to become informed active citizens who take action for a more sustainable future (p. 3).

In referring to education, a key objective of the strategy is to provide learners with the knowledge, dispositions, skills and values that will motivate and empower them to become active citizens and to take measures to live more justly and sustainably. There are significant opportunities for junior cycle Religious Education to contribute to this work.

World issues such as growing inequality and climate change, highlight the need for understanding of such issues within a context of global justice, interdependence, and human rights. These issues also require interrogation through the lens of values, ethics and beliefs. In junior cycle Religious Education, students should be enabled to examine different moral visions for the world and articulate their own vision. They should engage in critical and reflective thinking on some of the big questions of our time and discuss the role of religious beliefs and non-religious beliefs in creating a more just and sustainable world. Students should be encouraged to apply their learning through engagement in real-world social and environmental issues, such as Young Social Innovators, Green Schools programme, Worldwide Development Education programme, and linkages with community based or national organisations.

⁴⁷ *National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland (2014-2020), Education for Sustainability*, Department of Education and Skills, July 2014

Section Summary

At the heart of good religious education is the premise that we cannot teach with our backs to the world. For this reason, the context and world into which the new specification will sit needs careful consideration.

The new specification should sit within the vision of the student and of learning that is at the heart of the new junior cycle. It should also promote students' wellbeing as they will be supported in developing a sense of meaning, personal awareness and connectedness to others throughout their learning.

The context of growing religious diversity in Ireland has heightened awareness of the need for religious education that is inclusive and can contribute to mutual respect and understanding.

There is also increasing awareness that a lack of religious literacy can contribute to religious misunderstanding and intolerance. Junior Cycle Religious Education should build skills of interculturalism and religious literacy by facilitating informed, thoughtful and respectful conversations about religion and how it has influenced and is influenced by society and world events.

The new specification should also contribute to the National Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development by examining contemporary moral issues, such as poverty, inequality, gender justice, climate change and by enabling students to become active agents for change in the world.

5. Religious Education specification in the new junior cycle

While some may have distinct characteristics, arising from the area of learning involved, all junior cycle specifications, for subjects and short courses, will have a number of features in common. They will:

- Be outcomes based
- Reflect a continuum of learning with a focus on learner progression
- Set out clear expectations for learning
- Provide examples of those expectations
- Include a focus on all eight key skills
- Strive for clarity in language and for consistency in terminology.

The specification for all junior cycle subjects and short courses includes:

1	Introduction to junior cycle	This will be common to all specifications and will summarise the main features of the <i>Framework for Junior Cycle</i> .
2	Rationale	This will describe the nature and purpose of the subject as well as the general demands and capacities that it will place on, and require of, students. The text will, as appropriate, aim to draw attention to challenges and any access issues associated with study of the subject for students with specific needs or disabilities.
3	Aim	A concise aim for the subject will be presented
4	Links with Statements of learning Key skills	How the subject is linked to central features of learning and teaching at junior cycle will be highlighted and explained.
5	Overview Strands Learning outcomes	An overview of the subject will illustrate how it is organised and will set out the learning involved in strands and learning outcomes.

6	Expectations for students	These will be linked with groups of learning outcomes and will relate to examples of student work. The examples will be annotated, explaining whether the work is in line with, ahead of, or behind expectations for students.
7	Assessment and reporting	<p>This section refers to both formative and summative assessment. It outlines the assessment component/s through which students will present evidence of learning on an ongoing basis, and for the purposes of recording achievement for the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA)⁴⁸</p> <p>This description of assessment is supplemented by separate assessment guidelines for use in second and third years.</p>

⁴⁸ The JCPA is the new award for all junior cycle students. It will replace the current award, the Junior Certificate.

6. Brief for the review of Junior Cycle Religious Education

The review of Junior Cycle Religious Education will lead to the production of a specification in line with the template in section 5.

The specification will be at a common level. It will be designed to be taught and assessed in a minimum of 200 hours and structured around strands and learning outcomes.

The specification will be developed in alignment with the statements of learning (SoL), including some or all of the following:

The student:

- Has an awareness of personal values and an understanding of the process of moral decision making (SoL 5)
- Appreciates and respects how diverse values, beliefs and traditions have contributed to the communities and culture in which she/he lives (SoL 6)
- Values what it means to be an active citizen, with rights and responsibilities in local and wider contexts (SoL 7)
- Values local, national and international heritage, understands the importance of the relationship between past and current events and the forces that drive change (SoL 8)
- Has the awareness, knowledge, skills, values and motivation to live sustainably (SoL10)
- Takes action to promote her/his wellbeing and that of others (SoL 11)
- Uses technology and digital media tools to learn, communicate, work and think collaboratively and creatively in a responsible and ethical manner (SoL 24)

The development of the new specification will:

- Take account of research and developments in the field of religious education and of the experiences of teachers and students who have engaged with the current syllabus
- Embed key skills in the learning outcomes of the specification, as appropriate
- Consider what Classroom-Based Assessments are most suited to the course

- Address continuity and progression: how to connect with and build on related learning at primary level as well as providing a platform for encouraging the study of Religious Education in senior cycle.

More specifically, the development of the new specification will consider:

- The aims and purpose of Junior Cycle Religious Education, making them transparent and evident to students, teachers and parents.
- How the course will be organised; whether it will continue to be structured around existing areas of learning or might it be restructured around thematic strands and open up new areas of learning.
- How student-centred, active teaching and learning will be promoted which enables students to develop skills of communication, creativity and cooperation.
- How the specification can be relevant to students, allowing students to bring their own interests and questions to the academic study of religion and reflect on its meaning for their lives.
- How the specification can contribute to the holistic development of the student.
- How the specification can enable students and teachers to adopt an enquiring, thoughtful, critical and reflective approach to the study of R.E. leading to education *about* religion and *from* religion.
- How the specification can be flexible and sensitive to accommodate a range of school contexts and forms of patronage.
- The role of R.E. in building understanding about and respect for the diverse nature of religion and beliefs in contemporary Ireland and in the wider world.
- How R.E. can equally recognise, value and contribute to the experience of students from a plurality of religious traditions and cultures as well as those students who hold a non-religious worldview.
- The potential use of technology in Junior Cycle Religious Education teaching and learning as well as in the method of assessment.
- The potential to incorporate engagement in action for social justice, global sustainability and service learning as part of the course.

The work of the Religious Education Development Group will be based, in the first instance, on this brief. In the course of its work and discussions, elaborations of some of these points and additional points may be added to the brief.

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