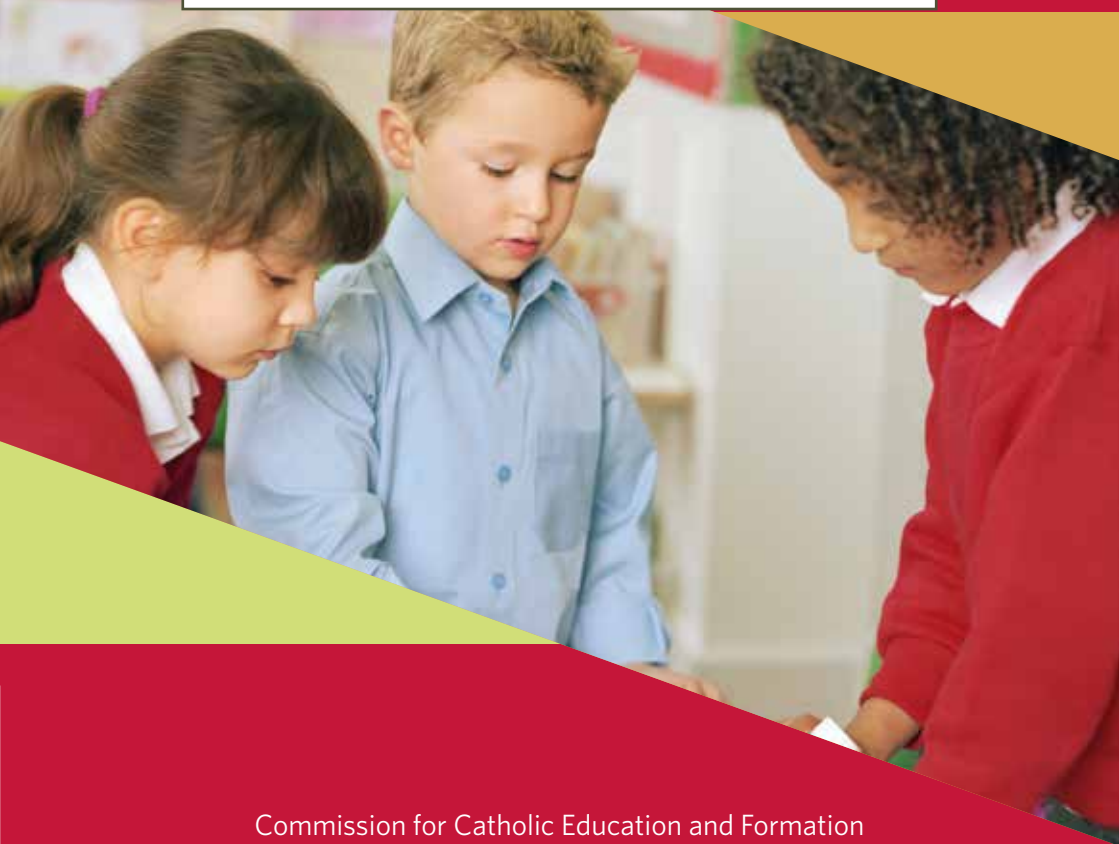


The Value of Religious Education in our Primary Schools

Response to the National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)

Consultation on a Curriculum in
Education about Religions and Beliefs
and Ethics



Commission for Catholic Education and Formation
of the Irish Bishops' Conference

30 March 2016

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Background

Consultation on the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) proposals for a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics took place from 3 November 2015 to 31 March 2016. Submissions were invited from teachers, principals, parents and all partners in education. The Irish Bishops' Conference, through the Commission for Catholic Education and Formation, presented the submission contained here. It was prepared following extensive engagement nationally with diocesan religious education advisors, lecturers in Religious Education, and with teachers and principals working in Catholic primary schools.



Introduction

The desire to create more inclusive schools and welcoming communities speaks to a tradition within the Catholic Church of inter-religious engagement and learning. Because of this tradition, Catholic Religious Education, particularly since the Second Vatican Council, is committed to teaching and learning about and from other religions, not as an option but as something intrinsic to the definition of Christian identity.

Catholic schools are as inclusive as any other type of school. The 'on the ground' experience across the country of Catholic schools as inclusive is borne out by the Economic and Social Research Institute publication, *School Sector Variation among Primary Schools in Ireland* (2012). In this study, it was found that there were no significant differences in pupils' perspectives on their school experience across the three sectors (Catholic, Multi-denominational and Minority Faith) surveyed. The research found that most children across the three sectors liked their school and their teachers and reported doing well in their schoolwork. Worth noting is that pupils who were particularly positive about the school and teachers came from a wide variety of different backgrounds.

Faith schools exist because there are parents who wish to have their children educated in accordance with their religious convictions. Catholic primary schools are embedded in parishes and local communities throughout the country. All surveys demonstrate a very high level of parental satisfaction with the service provided by these schools. Some recent comments caricature the real contribution of faith schools to Irish life.

Inspired by Christian faith and love, Catholic schools strive to be caring and inclusive communities. They have adapted to demographic change with significant net migration into Ireland and many of them have led the way in integrating migrants into local communities. They have been leaders in areas such as social inclusion, special needs and Traveller education.

Every school has a particular ethos or characteristic spirit. The ethos of a school is given expression in multiple ways and it informs all aspects of the life of the school. These include the understanding of the human person. This anthropological question is central: what vision of the human person underpins educational endeavours?

Children today inhabit a world in which they are bombarded with messages dominated by a consumer and material vision. Catholic schools seek to provide space, both intellectual and emotional, where pupils can explore and imagine a world with a spiritual horizon. This points to the possibility, the invitation, of understanding the human person in solidarity with other people, especially those most in need, being responsible for the world in which we live and open to a relationship with God.



The Ethos of Faith-based Schools

Parents are the primary educators of their children. Irish and international human rights law recognises this expressly. Article 42 of *Bunreacht na hÉireann* emphasises the rights of parents with regard to the Religious Education and religious formation of their children. In Ireland there is a demonstrated and significant demand among parents for denominational schooling. Catholic schools serve the needs and wishes of parents in this regard and, in seeking to uphold the legal right of schools to a vibrant religious ethos, are acting out of respect for and in order to protect, as a matter of legal and ethical principle, the rights and interests of parents in respect of their children's education. For, in a society such as Ireland's, where parents can establish schools and State funding is allocated according to procedures and conditions which, by law, must be free from religious discrimination, an important aspect of the right of parents and children to an education in conformity with their religious and philosophical convictions is expressed and upheld by the right of a school to protect and maintain its own ethos. Irish constitutional law endorses a pluralistic approach to education which is built upon the core principle of the primacy of parental choice and responsibility in education together with a realistic recognition of the important function of ethos in schooling. The freedom of schools to maintain an ethos is also a vital and concrete manifestation of the religious, associational and expressive freedoms enjoyed by all persons and recognised in national and international human rights law.

Religious Education in faith-based schools is inseparable from the ethos (characteristic spirit) of the school. The Education Act (1998) specifically requires the minister to have regard for

the characteristic spirit of the school in exercising his or her functions with regard to curriculum (section 30[2][b]). Further, the minister must allow reasonable instruction time in the school day for subjects relating to or arising from the characteristic spirit of the school (section 30[2][d]). Thus, NCCA proposals in areas impinging on Religious Education and the characteristic spirit of the school are of a different nature than other NCCA proposals. This is already acknowledged in the area of Relationships and Sexuality Education as part of the NCCA SPHE curriculum where it is explicitly acknowledged that the curriculum must be interpreted in the context of the characteristic spirit of the school. Similarly, NCCA proposals in areas such as religion and ethics should accord with the characteristic spirit of the school.

The determination of the ethos or characteristic spirit of a school is not the function of the NCCA or the minister but rests with the patron. Curriculum proposals in sensitive areas should take account of the fact that faith-based schools are committed to a particular understanding of the human person. The proposals made by the NCCA in the areas of ERB and Ethics must be read in this context.



Pluralism and Freedom of Religion

The principle of freedom of religion is part of the bedrock upon which western democracies are constructed. It finds succinct expression and support in article 44 of *Bunreacht na hÉireann*. The legally recognised human right referred to as ‘freedom of religion’ can be thought of as comprising two distinct but equally important dimensions of moral rights. It is both a positive freedom *for* religion, e.g. the freedom to practice, manifest and share one’s religious commitments, and a negative freedom from religious coercion (including anti-religious creeds), e.g. the freedom *from* coercion by public or private parties to assent to or *deny* any particular religious or philosophical proposition.

It is a mistake to reduce the right to religious freedom in education, enjoyed by parents and, in so far as is appropriate for their age and ability, their children, to an absolute but merely negative freedom from coercion. Such an interpretation has no objective grounding in the texts of human rights law which are clearly formulated to include both the positive and negative dimensions of religious freedom. Connected with this approach is a tendency to extend the meaning of ‘coercion’, ‘proselytism’ or ‘indoctrination’ to include any form of uninvited contact with the religious belief or practices of fellow members of one’s school community.


Some scholars speak of a contrast between epistemological and ideological pluralism: epistemological pluralism is the recognition of the right to existence of contradictory truth claims (e.g. Christianity, Islam, atheism) while ideological pluralism is the insistence that the only truth is pluralism. A truly pluralist society must surely learn to live with, and respect, difference while fostering loyalty to the nation and support for democratic structures of government.

Catholic parents have the human right to form their children in accord with their philosophical and religious convictions. Religious Education has nothing in common with indoctrination which amounts to a deliberate harming of students by undermining their natural ability to reason. In contrast, Catholic schools are committed to the deepest respect for both faith and reason and as such they contribute significantly to the formation of rational and mature citizens of our democratic society. To support and build on the religious faith to which children have already been introduced at home is not proselytism or indoctrination but education.

There is a temptation in contemporary Irish discourse to dismiss religious belief as inherently irrational, divisive, and anti-intellectual. Some go so far as to say that schools with a Catholic ethos cannot create a sense of civic virtue. This runs completely contrary to the Catholic education tradition which is built on a respect for faith and reason. Those who dismiss schools with a religious ethos as little more than proselytising and indoctrinating tools of religious authorities show little sense of the long evolution of Catholic schools over many centuries, the rich diversity within the Catholic sector and the principles which underpin such education today.

Parental rights in education and the right to religious freedom are closely related. Too often, however, religious faith is analysed, for the purposes of legal and human rights discourse, from a sceptical, external perspective rather than from a committed,

internal perspective. Worse, the former is sometimes asserted to be 'neutral'. From the external perspective, however, it is hard to appreciate how religious faith can be experienced by believers as a source of hope and enlightenment (not a restriction on their moral and intellectual vision), a gift (not a choice or acquisition) and a blessing (not a burden or constraint). Understood as such a fundamental human good, religious faith is something which believers naturally want to share with others, including their own children - indeed especially their children, for it is the very mark of parental love to give to one's children one's own most treasured gifts, be that one's time, insight, material resources or appreciation of religious faith. Parents, families and children with religious convictions have a right to give expression to these in faith-based schools. Such schools adopt a child-centred, holistic approach to education where religious belief is not compartmentalised but is fully acknowledged as part of lived reality for these parents, families and children.



Philosophical Foundations

The consultation document rightly identifies the diverse philosophical perspectives underpinning different approaches. The argument is made that while ERB and Ethics can happen in a patron's programme, it happens through a 'faith lens', whereas the approach being suggested by NCCA is based on 'a critical, pluralist and inquiry based epistemology'. An important question to ask in terms of any patron's programme or curriculum is through what else other than a 'faith lens' would or could Religious Education be done in a faith school?


There are, then, significant philosophical difficulties and resulting educational challenges. These include:

1. In the NCCA proposal children are being invited to see religious identity as the holding of beliefs interpreted by them. Postmodern approaches to Religious Education reject the meta-narratives of religions and their claims to objective truth. As Catholics we understand our Christian faith as a coherent tradition through which objective truth can be found. The Catholic school exists to educate children in Catholic religious life and in Catholic religious beliefs which are normative for them. For Catholics, the main problem with postmodern forms of Religious Education is that of relativism as it relates to truth and to morality.
2. Children's perceptions can make an important contribution to pedagogy; however, the postmodern pedagogical process suggested by the NCCA may form children in the view that they are the most important determinants of the meaning of their own beliefs. It is likely that young children could be

given the impression that beliefs are things which they create themselves, as if human beings were the source of religious beliefs. This approach contradicts the method followed in other subjects and could, therefore, create considerable confusion for the young child in particular.

3. In these secular approaches to Religious Education, reason is primary. Children are invited to stand back from religions and beliefs. In Catholic schools, revelation is primary and the learner's experience and reason are brought into dialogue with it. The NCCA curriculum will invite Catholic children to engage in the domain of religion in a way that undermines their capacity to immerse themselves in their own religion.
4. There is a presumed sceptical neutrality of reason in relation to religious beliefs. This is problematic for Catholic Religious Education because it suggests that religious meaning is determined by what one believes to be true.
5. These approaches require teachers to adopt and promote a pluralist approach to religion. This is an approach to religion that goes against the philosophical basis of Catholic Religious Education. Such a contradiction would place teachers in a very difficult position where conflicting philosophical approaches to religious education would have the potential to create significant confusion.

Given the serious nature of these philosophical concerns, this paper will now propose a way forward based on valuing the current provision of Religious Education in Catholic schools, respecting the rights of parents who wish to have faith-based education for their children, developing an ever deeper sense of care and love for all pupils, and supporting schools in living out their ethos.



Catholic Schools and Intercultural Dialogue

Catholic schools in Ireland form part of a large international network of such schools throughout the world. These schools are committed to respect for human dignity and religious freedom. These principles are founded on the belief that the human person is made in the image and likeness of God. At the Second Vatican Council there was renewed emphasis on human dignity, religious freedom, respect for conscience, the dialogue with the modern world, inter-church and inter-religious dialogue. All of these were based on the fundamental teaching of the eternal destiny of every human person as made in God's image. It is precisely because of this that Catholic schools must respect the personal dignity and human freedom of all members of the school community.

Ever since the Second Vatican Council's *Declaration on Christian Education*, the Holy See has published many important documents on Catholic education. The most recent is entitled *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools* (2013). It provides important reflections on what it is to be a Catholic school in a globalised world characterised by cultural and religious pluralism. Education is the key to mutual understanding and to building a civilisation of peace in such a complex world. The document challenges Catholic schools to engage in dialogue through facing the reality of a culturally diverse situation, by overcoming prejudices and by education through encounter with the other. It notes that 'schools are privileged places for intercultural dialogue' (6).

What is this intercultural dialogue? It is not cultural relativism, which suggests that all cultures and traditions are essentially the same and often seeks to quarantine related practices within a

purely private sphere of life. Nor is it religious fundamentalism, which fails to engage with that which is other and withdraws into a ghetto secure in its own unchallenged identity. Rather it is an invitation to engagement with the other person's faith and culture based on innovative and courageous fidelity to one's own faith and culture. Such dialogue is not just talking but it includes all inter-religious relationships with both individuals and communities. It seeks common ethical values which are the foundations of justice and peace. The aim of this dialogue is not to abandon one's own inherited faith and practices but to rediscover them in a deeper way through encounter with the other. This is the opposite of relativism. The relativistic model is founded on the value of tolerance, but limits itself to accepting the other person, excluding the possibility of dialogue and recognition of each other in mutual transformation. Such an idea of tolerance, in fact, leads to a substantially passive meaning of relationship with whoever has a different culture. It does not demand that one take an interest in the needs and sufferings of others, nor that their reasons may be heard; there is no self-comparison with their values, and even less sense of developing love for them (22).

How can a Catholic school be a vehicle of such intercultural dialogue? The document notes four types of dialogue: the dialogue of life; the dialogue of works; theological dialogue; the dialogue of religious experience. The dialogue of life reflects on the joys, challenges and sorrows of life especially in the context of the fundamental realities of family, language and culture. The dialogue of works encourages those involved to collaborate in the holistic development of all men and women. Theological dialogue demands knowledge of the beliefs of various religious traditions and their mutual interaction. The dialogue of religious experience is based on the lived encounter of various faiths, not on intellectual abstractions, but rather on the actual lives of the faithful. A Catholic primary school should facilitate the dialogue of life, the dialogue of works

and the dialogue of religious experience; it is not the time or place in life for theological dialogue. The dialogue of life, the dialogue of works and the dialogue of religious experience can involve all faith traditions present in the school. Pupils whose parents wish them to have no faith affiliation can be invited to share in the dialogue of life and works.

In 2015 the Catholic Schools Partnership issued *Catholic Primary Schools in a Changing Ireland: Sharing Good Practice on Inclusion of All Pupils*. It proposes practical steps that schools can take to enhance their commitment to intercultural dialogue and it highlights the important role that the *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland* will play in Catholic schools.



Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland

The *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland* (CPPRECI) was launched in September 2015. A new primary Religious Education programme, *Grow in Love*, is being developed that will meet the aims, principles and outcomes of the new Catholic curriculum. *Grow in Love* has been introduced to junior infants and senior infants from September 2015. The programme will be developed up to sixth class on a phased basis over the coming four years.

Among other key objectives, the *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland* seeks to ensure the ongoing engagement in Catholic schools in education about religions and beliefs and ethics.

ECUMENICAL AND INTER-RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE

'Inter-belief' and 'inter-cultural' dialogue is highlighted in the NCCA consultation material as a key aim of any new curriculum in ERB and Ethics (*Education about Religions and Beliefs [ERB] and Ethics in the Primary School: Consultation Paper*, pp. 21–23). In terms of the new Catholic primary RE curriculum, the 'Ecumenical and Inter-religious Perspective' is listed and explained as one of the defining features of the curriculum (CPPRECI, p. 21). Catholic schools are reminded that Christians are called to 'acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods' found among people of other faiths (p. 21). Teaching about different religions and beliefs should be 'carried out in a fair and balanced manner in Catholic schools' (p. 21). Such ecumenical and inter-religious learning, within the context particularly of developing skills of inter-religious literacy, will enable the child to develop as a 'capable, confident, curious and caring

individual' (*Consultation Paper*, p. 19) in his/her engagements and interactions with those who have different beliefs and life stances to the child's own.

When the CPPRECI is examined in more adequate detail and indeed in a more balanced way than the review contained in the NCCA document *An Overview of Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics Content in Patrons' Programmes* (pp. 25, 28–31, 38 ff.) it becomes clear how this teaching of other religions and beliefs is to be carried out.

The NCCA analysis narrows its examination of the CPPRECI's content relating to these broad goals to the inter-religious learning outcomes and content contained only in the Christian Faith strand. However, the inter-religious learning outcomes and their related content in this strand do not reflect all of the content and outcomes in the curriculum that relate to the NCCA definition of ERB across the other three strands (CPPRECI, p. 33). This is a significant omission. There are specific aims and learning outcomes from the CPPRECI that are directly related to the NCCA goals of awareness, tolerance, respect for and celebration of the beliefs, values and stances for living of others and which are listed among the stated general aims of a curriculum in ERB (*Consultation Paper*, p. 12). These are not included in the NCCA document – *An Overview of Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics content in Patrons' Programmes*. They are outlined below.

The children should be enabled to:

- understand and appreciate difference and diversity and value and respect people with particular abilities and needs (Moral Strand, Level 1, p. 61)
- respect and respond to difference and diversity among peers (Moral Strand, Level 2, p. 78)

- develop respect for the views, feelings and possessions of others, in their own community and in other communities (Moral Strand, Level 2, p. 78)
- begin to explore other Christian, Jewish and Muslim communities, developing respect for how they worship (Moral Strand, Level 2, p. 78)
- begin to distinguish between a religious and non-religious worldview, showing sensitivity and respect for people who hold beliefs different from their own (Christian Faith Strand, Level 3, p. 84)
- practise effective interpersonal skills in order to relate to others in peaceful, tolerant, and non-discriminatory ways (Moral Strand, Level 3, p. 100)
- develop an understanding of the importance of ecumenical activity and inter-religious dialogue and of how religious people work together to create a better world (Christian Faith Strand, Level 4, p. 106)

It is important to note this material for the following reasons:

- a. While it is correct to say that discrete learning about religions and beliefs represents a small amount of the total time allocated for Religious Education in the CPPRECI, the time and attention given to goals similar to those of ERB in the CPPRECI is much longer than this. Given that some of the outcomes listed above are 'core outcomes' and, therefore, return at every level of a spiral curriculum, the time allocated to teaching respect for difference and diversity in the Catholic curriculum is much stronger than the NCCA paper would lead readers to believe.

b. It is important not to exclude the aim that children be introduced to non-religious worldviews (p. 84). This aim is left out of the NCCA review. This particular aim is important because it leads to the teaching about atheism (Level 4, p. 85). The NCCA review gives the incorrect impression that the CPPRECI only teaches about monotheistic faiths. The study of atheism is included in the CPPRECI though not in the inter-religious learning sections which formed the focus of the NCCA review.

EDUCATION IN ETHICS AND THE CATHOLIC PRESCHOOL AND PRIMARY RELIGIOUS EDUCATION CURRICULUM FOR IRELAND

The CCPRECI, in terms of what it sees as its defining features, stresses the central importance of the 'Christian moral perspective' (p. 22). There are also significant justice and ecological perspectives that are identified as defining features (pp. 20, 24). Within the Christian moral perspective, key virtues, values and attitudes permeating the entire primary RE curriculum are similar to the many key values and attitudes listed in the NCCA consultation paper relating to ethics education, including, for example, in terms of the CPPRECI, citizenship, non-violence, justice, social awareness and moral responsibility (for example, outlined in Table 2, *Consultation Paper*, p. 16).

Again, in terms of the document *An Overview of Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics Content in Patrons' Programmes*, what is presented is arguably a narrow sample of aims from the Christian Morality strand of the CPPRECI. This does not constitute an overview of the entire ethics content in the CPPRECI. In relation to the key areas mentioned in the NCCA definition of ethics - human dignity and freedom, human rights, social justice and the common good - the following aspects of CPPRECI should be noted in any review.

HUMAN DIGNITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

In the Catholic curriculum, children are taught about their dignity as children of God and of the dignity of all persons created by God. This fundamental understanding of the human person as created by God and called to loving relationship with others is why Catholic schools teach tolerance and respect. It is also why Catholic schools are called to facilitate pupils to enter into dialogue with those who have different beliefs to their own. This belief underpins all relationships within the school, engagement with parents and with the community in which schools exist, and with charitable causes with which children are invited to engage. It also impacts on policy formation, communication, leadership and school management. Not surprisingly, this belief also inspires the writers not only of the CPPRECI but also Religious Education programme writers. These programmes are called to 'reflect social and cultural diversity within the school and within society as a whole. They are required to provide positive images of religious and ethnic groups, gender and disability' (CPPRECI, p. 21). Further, the CPPRECI states that 'the connections between racism and religious prejudice will be explored where appropriate' (CPPRECI, p. 22). For this reason, the CPPRECI teaches children that Christians are called to go beyond simple tolerance of others. Christians are called to show 'respect and love' to those who think or act differently than they do in religious matters (pp. 69, 88, 112-13).

This understanding of the inherent dignity of all people finds further expression in the belief that there are universal and binding moral principles which can be known by human reason, unaided by revelation. These universal and binding moral principles expressed as human rights are richly addressed in the CPPRECI. While discrete, teaching on human rights on an abstract level is found at Level 4 (p. 127), the core underpinnings for rights education are found at every level with opportunities for children to explore together shared values and commitments. The NCCA consultation,

similarly, in terms of Ethics education, emphasises the importance of developing children's understanding of the important place of human rights in their own ethical formation (*Consultation Paper*, pp. 6, 9, 14, 25).

HUMAN FREEDOM AND DECISION-MAKING

The CPPRECI emphasises for children that every human person is free and that we are responsible for our moral actions and decisions (e.g. Moral Strand, Level 2, p. 78). This important emphasis on freedom is also highlighted in the consultation paper as core to any worthwhile ethical education (*Consultation Paper*, pp. 20, 37). Some important skills of the Catholic moral curriculum which lay the foundations for a mature Christian understanding of freedom and judicious decision-making include: helping children to understand that they are accountable for their decisions and responsible for their words and actions; enabling children to reflect on their freedom to make choices and the relationship between choice and consequences; teaching children to recognise their conscience and to develop the skill of making moral decisions with an informed conscience (CPPRECI, 61-2, 78-80, 100-2, 126-30).


THE COMMON GOOD AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

The concept of the 'common good' provides an important balance against too strong an individualism by emphasising the social aspect of the human person. It is an obvious social expression of the belief in the dignity of the human person. For this reason, the common good is understood to be at the heart of good Religious Education. For example, in the CPPRECI, children are encouraged to have a strong sense of social justice and to contribute to the common good. This emphasis on the common good also reflects, in part, the understanding of Ethics education contained in the NCCA consultation paper with its similar emphasis on 'service of the common good' (pp. 6, 37, 43).

For Catholic schools, this emphasis is not simply theoretical. Children in Catholic schools are invited to put their understanding and learning into practice in activities associated with Christian charity, stewardship of creation and social justice, so that they grow in moral awareness and authentic Christian concern for the poor, for human equality and for care of the earth.

A sample of aims and learning outcomes from the CPPRECI that directly relate to the NCCA understanding of Ethical Education includes the following. Students will:

- understand their dignity and worth as created in God's image (Morality Strand, Level 1, p. 61)
- respect and respond to difference and diversity among peers (Morality strand, Level 1, p. 61)
- develop their concern for others, for animals and for the natural environment (moral awareness, ecological awareness, mission and social justice orientation) (Morality Strand, Level 1, p. 61)
- develop empathy, a sense of justice, fairness, friendship, healthy attitudes to diversity and peace-making skills (Morality Strand, Level 1, p. 61)
- understand and appreciate difference and diversity and value and respect people with particular abilities and needs (Morality Strand, Level 1, p. 61)
- show respect towards self and others (Morality Strand, Level 1, p. 61)
- develop a sense of interdependence, of justice and of fairness as reciprocity (Moral Strand, Level 2, p. 78)
- reflect on their freedom to make choices and the relationship between choice and consequence (freedom of choice and human responsibility, agency, self-reflection, moral judgement) (Moral Strand, Level 2, p. 78)


- explore their responsibility to care for and preserve the local environment (Moral Strand, Level 2, p. 78)
 - develop their understanding of freedom of choice, sin, moral judgement and human responsibility (critical moral orientation, freedom, development of conscience) (Moral Strand, Level 3, p. 100)
 - practise effective interpersonal skills in order to relate to others in peaceful, tolerant, and non-discriminatory ways (Moral Strand, Level 3, p. 100)
 - begin to develop an ethic that respects, defends, and promotes the rights and wellbeing of every person regardless of gender, race, social status, personal achievement or social contribution (justice orientation) (Moral Strand, Level 3, p. 100)
 - develop an awareness of social justice, ecological justice, universal solidarity and responsibility (Moral Strand, Level 4, p. 126)
 - develop strategies to promote a more just society and world (moral agency and imagination) (Moral Strand, Level 4, p. 126)
- 

ERB and Ethics and the Catholic Patron's Programme

It is arguable that the CPPRECI, and the programmes developed from it, meet many of the aims of ERB and Ethics as outlined in the consultation paper, that is 'to enhance the personal, moral, cultural and spiritual development of children, while also contributing to developing those skills, capabilities, attitudes and dispositions which they will need for life and work in an increasingly complex and diverse world' (p. 12). This is in line with the 1999 curriculum, *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) and *Intercultural Education in the Primary School: Guidelines for Schools* (NCCA, 2004) and indeed the specific aims outlined in the consultation paper as they relate (for the ERB component) to personal understanding, mutual understanding, spiritual awareness, and character education and connection to the wider world (for the Ethics component). Notwithstanding all of the above, there appears within the consultation document a reluctance to explore more fully the option of ensuring the aims of ERB and Ethics contained in the consultation document are met through the patron's programme. However, in *Encountering Children in a Curriculum for Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics - A Review* the NCCA suggests that it could work in partnership with patrons to deal with the issues raised by a proposed curriculum in ERB and Ethics (p. 22).

It is important to note that the approach suggested by the CPPRECI is in line with the 1999 primary curriculum, and shares the view contained in the NCCA consultation material on ERB and Ethics of the child as capable, confident, curious and caring. The CPPRECI takes into consideration children's feelings, values and attitudes, and the contemporary social and cultural context in which the child lives (p. 23). The curriculum also acknowledges that 'teachers too

are representative of the diversity of our multi-cultural society, bringing to the task a wide variety of experience' (p. 14). Through the teacher, the child is encouraged to question the worldview of the curriculum, 'hence the importance placed on encouraging critical reasoning and real engagement with children's culture in the curriculum' (p. 23). Indeed, the first and most important guidelines provided for teachers engaging with the CPPRECI is that 'Catholic primary Religious Education entails true freedom'. Therefore, while teaching through a faith lens, Catholic schools and Catholic Religious Education, like all good education, respect and support the freedom of children in the classroom, and indeed the rights and freedom of their parents.





Conclusion

It is in the context of valuing the current provision for Religious Education in Catholic schools, of respecting the rights of parents who wish to have faith-based education for their children, of developing an ever deeper sense of care and love for all pupils, and of supporting schools in living out their ethos that the Commission for Education and Formation of the Irish Episcopal Conference makes this submission to the NCCA consultation process. The Commission would welcome further dialogue with the NCCA concerning the complex issues raised in the consultation process and how these might be addressed



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