

## Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics in the Primary School: Consultation Paper



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# Introduction

In recent years the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has contributed a number of significant milestones to the development of Irish primary education. The development of Aistear—the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, set a new direction for the experiences of children in infant classrooms. The recently completed integrated Language Curriculum breaks new ground in connecting children’s language learning across their first, second and other language contexts. This paper breaks further new ground in proposing Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics, and inviting responses, ideas and debate through a consultation process that will last into 2016.

While the development of a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics was one of the key recommendations of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector (Coolahan et al, 2012) the focus of the NCCA’s work, and of this consultation, is on what children should learn and for what purpose in all schools beyond 2016. The unique composition of Ireland’s primary sector, coupled with current debates about school patronage, gives rise to additional sensitivities over and above the general cut and thrust of debates about curriculum change in Ireland. While these are acknowledged, the focus of this consultation is on curriculum for ERB and Ethics. Although the consultation breaks new ground in proposing something for all children, for many teachers, schools, and children, at least some of the ideas presented here are well-ploughed furrows. In Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE), many children already engage in learning about religions in their communities and across the globe. In patrons’ programmes in religious and ethical education, children learn how beliefs shape actions, and how decision-making and choices reflect personal and community values, and that respect for the other and the different is fundamental to living well together.

The ideas in this paper have been informed by this work already present in Irish schools. It also draws on experiences in other countries, and on the insights of scholars and researchers in the field. We are making a particular effort to ensure that the findings of research are available to inform the consultation. Summaries are included with this paper, but full reports are also available on international experiences, on patrons’ programmes currently on offer in schools, and on reflections on the foundations for this area of study. Other useful studies available include research on children’s wellbeing and learning, and on the organisation of the school day in Irish primary schools.

The issue of time is an important one. In proposing a new area of learning, NCCA is acutely aware that teachers have already told us of their experiences of curriculum overload, and of their concern for the quality of children’s learning and engagement at school. Next year, NCCA will be advising on the issue

of how best to manage and allocate time across the curriculum. That advice will be informed by a number of strands of our work, including the deliberations ahead on ERB and Ethics.

Definitions, such as those that follow, are presented to structure debate; but we recognise that in this area of learning, multiple definitions, perspectives and interpretations exist and will feature in the deliberations ahead. In inviting public as well as stakeholder engagement, we look forward to the debates ahead. In line with NCCA's commitment to including children and young people in curriculum development, their voices will also be heard over the months ahead.

Details of how to participate in the consultation are available at [www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe](http://www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe).

### ***What is Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB)?***

ERB helps children to know about and understand the cultural heritage of the major forms of religion, belief traditions and worldviews which have been embraced by humankind. It does not nurture the belief or practice of any one religion; instead it focuses on fostering an informed awareness of the main theist, non-theist, and secular beliefs including key aspects of their cultural manifestations.

### ***What is Ethics Education?***

The teaching of ethics includes the formation and the promotion of a personal commitment to the dignity and freedom of all human beings, the importance of human rights and responsibilities, the place of justice within society, and the service of the common good. These are all essential to education for citizenship and the proper functioning of democracy. Learning about ethics is important for all but developing modes of ethical behaviour is of central importance to children's development.

### ***Who is this curriculum for?***

A curriculum for ERB and Ethics is for all children attending primary schools in the Republic of Ireland. Religions, beliefs and ethics are important aspects of life and human experience. Some children are members of religious communities and are brought up by their families to experience and practice a particular faith. Other children are raised in families who espouse a secular or non-theist worldview. Often children are aware of churches, mosques, synagogues or other religious buildings, perhaps in their locality, in the media, on the internet or on holiday. Children hear people talking about religious characters or events; they may attend special occasions such as weddings, funerals or festivals in places of religious worship, they may listen to stories and songs and view films, paintings and theatre performances that include references to religious places or ideas. Children can also encounter secular worldviews in their friends and communities, in their reading and interaction with media. Indeed, by

attending denominational or multi-denominational schools in Ireland all children encounter religions, beliefs and ethical considerations in their daily lives. ERB and Ethics will help children to explore these aspects of life and draw connections with these to other dimensions of human experience.

***What is the relationship between ERB and Ethics?***

ERB and Ethics have been combined in a priority area for development in the Forum's Report (Coolahan et al, 2012, p. 92). The particular relationship between ERB and Ethics is discussed further in this paper. However, there are some immediate differences to note between an ERB curriculum and an Ethics curriculum.

While conventional understanding of ERB refers to 'belief' and emphasises a 'comparative religious' dimension, Ethics (or Ethics Education) is seen as much broader in scope; ethics education can take place within and across many curriculum areas. Considering the two areas as one curriculum may lead to confusion and the question of whether ERB and Ethics should be seen as distinct yet complementary areas of the curriculum is discussed in detail later in the paper. In turn, it is to be expected that curriculum developments in these two areas may highlight different challenges and opportunities. What is clear is that both can contribute to and support the development of inclusive school communities.

***What is the relationship between ERB and Ethics and the patron's programme?***

Each school patron has a right to develop a programme that supports and contributes to the ethos of their school. The Education Act (1998) 30 (2) (d), requires the Minister for Education and Skills to ensure that a 'reasonable amount' of time is set aside in each school day for 'subjects relating to or arising from the characteristic spirit of the school'. A curriculum for ERB and Ethics, for all children, is separate from these programmes and is part of a new phase of work to develop the primary curriculum beginning with the areas of Language and Mathematics. As outlined in the Forum's Report (Coolahan et al, 2012, p. 92) ERB and Ethics is in no sense intended to replace the patron's programme or faith formation education in denominational schools. It is important to note that there are a variety of patron programmes in Irish primary schools, ranging from denominational to multi-denominational programmes and so the perspectives taken across these programmes vary greatly. The possibility that a curriculum in ERB and Ethics may contribute to the enhancement of the teaching and learning in a patron's programme by contributing to the broad fields of religious and ethical education may be realised in the development of the curriculum.

***What is the structure of this consultation document?***

There are four sections in this paper. Section one introduces the draft rationale, vision and aims for the curriculum before proposing some features of curriculum development in section two. Both section one and two have been informed by the development of the background material, supporting the development of a curriculum for ERB and Ethics; the key messages from which can be found in Appendix 2. Section three explores some possible approaches to curriculum development and raises the question, 'Where to locate ERB and Ethics without contributing to curriculum overload and ensuring the curriculum's visibility and impact in the classroom?' The final section provides some detail on the consultation and engagement process with stakeholders and the wider public.



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# Rationale, vision and aims for ERB and Ethics

## Rationale

This section has been organised using a question and answer format and presents the rationale for the introduction of ERB and Ethics to Irish primary schools.

### ***Why is a curriculum in ERB and Ethics being developed?***

An important aspect of a child's education involves learning about and understanding the lives, values and traditions of friends, classmates and members of the wider community. In Irish schools a child's sense of their identity and belonging is nurtured through experiential learning, the creation of inclusive school environments and positive relationships between the child and their teacher. Such learning can already take place in subjects such as Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Drama, the patrons' programmes and indeed across elements of the entire primary curriculum. However, to ensure that every child has access to structured, coherent and incremental learning in this area, and to ensure the good practices that already take place in schools are recognised and supported, the NCCA is developing a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics.

It is widely accepted that knowledge of religions and beliefs is an important part of a quality education and that it can foster democratic citizenship and mutual respect, enhance religious freedom and promote an understanding of diversity. It has been highlighted by a number of scholars, and in light of the resurgence of religious conflict, that the need to learn '*from*' religion is a key aspect of religious education (Grimmit, 2000, Hull, 2001, McGrady, 2013). The focus in this approach is on children as co-constructors of knowledge and the manner in which learning about religions, beliefs and ethics relates to their experiences', is internalised by the child and is made meaningful through their engagement with it.

Equally ethics has been a valued area of study for millennia and its study is particularly relevant in a pluralist society in which there is a diversity of understandings as to how to live. Ethical understanding informs how people live their lives and is central to daily life. Ethics education often consists of critical reflection on the meaning of behaviour and on the values and norms that people adopt in order to guide or regulate their conduct. Ethical reflection enables the development of a person's moral sense, in addition to expressing the individual's capacity for exercising critical judgment to contribute to respectful co-existence. The Ethics curriculum may focus on challenges related to community life such as relations between people, freedom, human rights, responsibility, friendship, citizenship and mutual

assistance; areas which are also explored in some subjects currently in the Primary School Curriculum. Ethics may also address questions that concern us as members of a society in constant flux, such as the role of the media, the protection of the environment or the possible impact that scientific and technological advances can have on people and society.

## Vision

### ***What is the proposed vision for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics?***

The vision for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics is for a pluralist and values-based education which can enable teachers to support children in our schools to live in and contribute positively to a diverse world. The curriculum will contribute to the development of the child in five key areas: *personal understanding, mutual understanding, character education, connection to the wider world and spiritual awareness*. These are outlined in the aims section below.

### ***How will this vision contribute to the lives of children?***

Participation in ERB and Ethics will help foster a sense of identity and belonging in children by developing their self-awareness, self-confidence, self-esteem and, ultimately, their happiness. Children will share ideas about the world, promoting relationships and friendships with those of different belief backgrounds. Through a child's reflection on their own beliefs and values, and on those of others, they will grow in respect for themselves and others. Children's active engagement in education for ethics will contribute to their awareness of the complexities of human behaviour and promote the development of skills and dispositions required to live and contribute in a positive way to a diverse society. Children will develop an acceptance of the right to hold a particular belief or attitude; they will be sensitive to the diversity of religions and beliefs and the contribution this diversity makes to the richness of society. Children will engage in and promote communication and dialogue between people of different cultural, religious and non-religious backgrounds; they will learn how to contest prejudice and the worst effects of stereotyping. Through engagement with ERB and Ethics children will develop the disposition to contribute positively to a diverse society.

### ***How will this vision contribute to the lives of parents?***

The proposed curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics will recognise the parent as the primary educator of the child and the most influential factor in a child's development. The central role of parents and families is evident in the education of ethics and the handing on or forming of values. It is widely recognised that significant educational, social and behavioural benefits accrue to the child as a result of effective partnership between parents and teachers. A curriculum in ERB and Ethics will support this partnership by linking the teaching and learning in the classroom to

the child's experience within their homes and communities. This process will involve parents directly in the learning experiences of their child supporting them to be an active participant in the educational process.

***How will this vision contribute to the teacher's practice?***

The proposed ERB and Ethics curriculum will build upon the established principles of teacher autonomy and professional judgement that are a defining feature of primary education. Although many of the pedagogical principles are consistent with those of the 1999 curriculum (DES, 1999) and *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009), it is nonetheless a new development and so there is opportunity for professional learning in this context. The teaching of ERB and Ethics according to the Toledo Principles should be supported by teaching that is '*objective, critical and pluralist*' (ODIHR, 2007, p. 68, 88, 104) and so this involves reflexivity from the teacher, checking and adapting their own knowledge to ensure that it meets the needs of children. Reflexivity and self-awareness requires active and in-depth reflection on the part of the teacher. Through this reflection process it becomes clear that teachers may be on their own educational journey, learning more about their own personal convictions and assumptions; thus coming to a better understanding of themselves, their world and their place in it.

***How will this vision contribute to school ethos?***

ERB and Ethics is a key element in developing, contributing to and supporting inclusive school communities, requiring a whole school approach. Inclusive schools are characterised by learning environments that reflect and show pride in the linguistic, ethnic, cultural and religious diversity that characterises the school community. As such, they provide a support for the positive self-image of all children irrespective of their ethnicity, culture or religion; as well as reinforcing the normality of diversity for all children. The introduction of ERB and Ethics as a central contributor to inclusive education and the development of respectful, pluralist environments further underlines the importance of being aware of the visible and hidden practices of a school community in the construction of inclusive school environments.

***How will this vision contribute to society?***

ERB and Ethics seeks to emphasise the societal worth of diversity, whether in religious beliefs, gender, ethnicity or other forms. However, with increasing diversity in society comes the need for a sense of collective belonging and affinity, which joins individuals and groups together. The ERB curriculum seeks to develop a clear understanding of difference across belief systems, while also emphasising what is common and shared. Ethics, in developing individual critical thought and values, seeks to develop personal responsibility while also looking to the common good.

## Aims

The 1999 curriculum (DES, 1999) emphasises the concept of helping children to achieve personal fulfilment and individual well-being. The three general aims of primary education are:

- to enable the child to live a full life as a child and to realise his or her potential as a unique individual
- to enable the child to develop as a social being through living and co-operating with others and so contribute to the good of society
- to prepare the child for further education and lifelong learning. (p. 7)

ERB and Ethics, although distinct areas of education in their own right, together will support the general aims of the 1999 curriculum and the general aim of *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* 'to help all children develop as competent and confident learners within loving relationships with others, recognising that each child is unique with his/her own set of strengths, abilities, interests, and needs.' ERB and Ethics will 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.

### ***What are the general aims of an ERB and Ethics curriculum?***

The general aims of the proposed ERB and Ethics curriculum support those of the 1999 curriculum, *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) and the *Intercultural Education in the Primary School Guidelines* (NCCA, 2004) and can be expressed as supporting teachers to enable children to-

- develop self-awareness, confidence, personal beliefs and positive social identities
- have knowledge and understanding of how religious and non-religious worldviews have contributed to the culture in which we live, and continue to have an impact on individuals and relationships between individuals and their communities
- express comfort, empathy and joy with human diversity, use accurate language for human differences, and form deep, caring human connections
- recognise unfairness, injustice and inequality and understand the relationship between rights and responsibilities
- appreciate the impact of prejudice and discriminatory actions on others.

The specific aims for the curriculum are outlined below for both ERB and Ethics. Although they are presented separately here it is important to acknowledge that there is significant overlap between the two areas and together they contribute to the general aims outlined above. The specific aims below are intended to be developed further in light of the responses from the consultation process, informing the work of the curriculum development group for ERB and Ethics.

***What are the specific aims for a curriculum in ERB?***

The specific aims for the proposed ERB curriculum are set out in three areas:

*Personal understanding*

ERB can play an important part in promoting personal understanding and encouraging children to feel confident about their own beliefs, opinions and identities and to be confident in sharing these. The curriculum will support the teacher to enable the child to-

- recognise their own uniqueness, realise their self-worth and value and develop a positive sense of their own beliefs and values
- develop confidence, personal responsibility and self-respect
- continue on the journey of personal understanding and be empowered to make informed decisions.

*Mutual understanding*

ERB can play an important part in promoting mutual understanding between people by learning about the diversity of different religious and ethnics groups and the destructive power of prejudice. The curriculum will support the teacher to enable the child to-

- develop good relationships, empathise and be sensitive to the impact of their ideas, decisions and behaviour on other people
- explore the variety and richness of humankind, respect a person's right to hold and practice an individual belief system and articulate values.

*Spiritual awareness*

ERB can play an important part in promoting spiritual awareness, personal significance, identity and belonging of a child. The curriculum will support the teacher to enable the child to-

- reflect within and beyond themselves about the precious nature of human existence and the importance of inner well-being

- discuss and reflect upon the key questions of meaning and truth
- develop curiosity and questioning so that her/his own views on and ideas about religious and spiritual matters can be developed and consolidated
- develop greater sense of comfort with oneself, self-awareness and self-esteem.

***What are the specific aims for a curriculum in Ethics?***

The specific aims for an Ethics curriculum are:

*Character Education*

Ethics can play an important part in promoting character education and instilling an understanding of right and wrong by supporting the teacher to enable the child to-

- appreciate that people's rights also imply responsibilities, to understand that by taking responsibility for their actions, developing a pro-active spirit and empowering themselves they can contribute to their world
- develop a sense of conscience, recognise the importance of personal integrity and promote an active tolerance and respect across religious/cultural divides
- develop the skills of reflection, discernment, critical thinking and decision-making when making moral decisions.

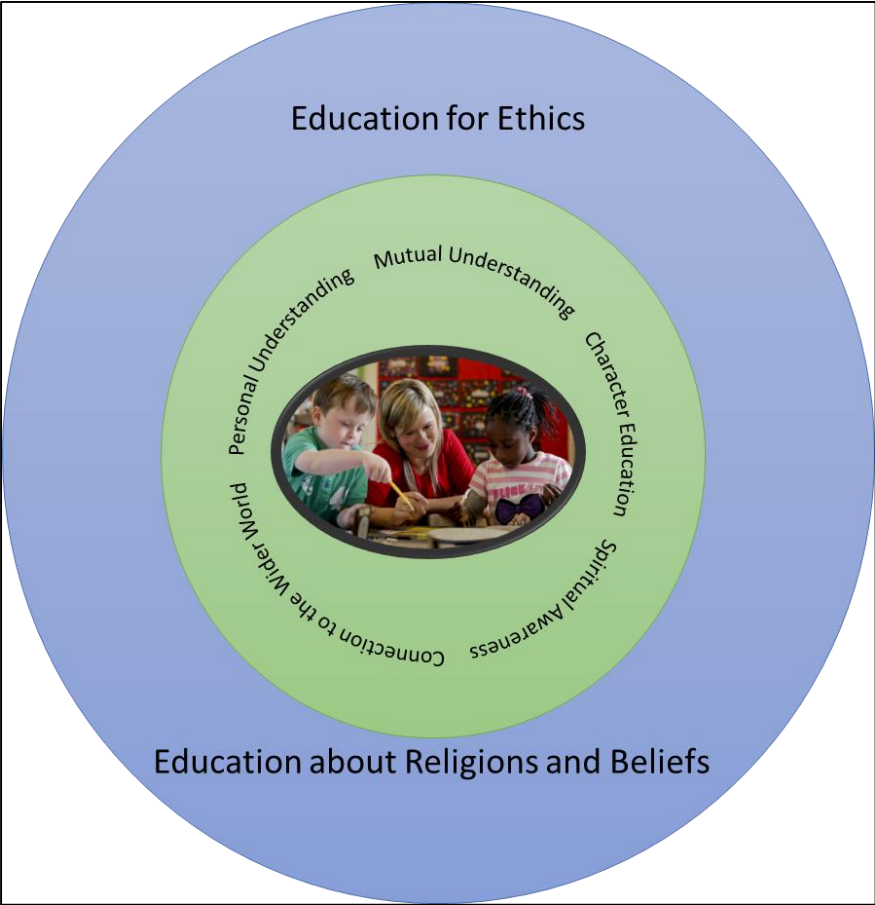
*Connection to the wider world*

Ethics can play an important part in promoting the child's connection to their wider world and their awareness and understanding of diversity in local and global communities. The curriculum will support the teacher to enable the child to-

- foster good relationships, respect difference between people and understand the destructive power of prejudice, discrimination, racism and bullying
- develop an awareness and respect for the environment and understand the concept of sustainable development and stewardship for the environment
- investigate and think about topical spiritual, moral, social and cultural issues and challenges of living in a changing democratic society as well justifying and defending personal opinions and beliefs
- develop a critical knowledge, understanding and awareness of human rights, equality, culture, social justice and social inclusivity.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the specific aims for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics.

**Figure 1: Specific aims for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics**



The specific aims will be incorporated within and across the content of the curriculum in ERB and Ethics. Drawing from international examples outlined in the work of the National Foundation for Educational Research (Grayson et al, 2014), some possible themes that may be present in the curriculum are outlined in the tables below.

**Table 1: Possible themes for an ERB curriculum**

Class	Possible themes
Junior infants- second class	Myself and my family
	Family celebrations
	Meaningful stories to me and others
	My relationships with others
	Important people of belief in my community
	Places of cultural significance in my community
	Belief systems: key figures and rites of passage

<b>Third class-sixth class</b>	Believing: what people believe, humanity and the natural world
	Celebrations: how and why celebrations are important in belief systems
	Symbols: how and why symbols express meaning
	Leaders and teachers: figures who have an influence on the beliefs of others: locally, nationally and globally
	Belonging: where and how people belong and why belonging is important
	Worship, pilgrimage and sacred places
	The journey of life and death
	Belief systems: rites, values and beliefs

**Table 2: Possible themes for an Ethics curriculum**

<b>Class</b>	<b>Possible themes</b>
<b>Junior infants-second class</b>	Who am I?
	Me and my community
	Who I live with and surrounding families
	My friendships
	How we like to be treated
<b>Third class-sixth class</b>	Citizenship
	Sustainability: social, environmental, cultural and economic
	Taking responsibility
	Climate change
	Equality and justice

The themes outlined above are provided as examples of the types of content that could be expected in the proposed ERB and Ethics curriculum. These are by no means to be read as complete, exhaustive or final. It is important to note the broad learning domain that ‘ethics’ encapsulates. The level to which ‘ethics’, as one component of this curriculum, can incorporate all ethical perspectives is an interesting point of debate.

**How will the aims for ERB and Ethics connect with Aistear?**



The specific aims outlined above have strong connections with those of Aistear. Table 3 draws connections between the specific aims of ERB and Ethics and the aims of Aistear as described across the four themes of the early childhood curriculum framework<sup>1</sup>.

**Table 3: Connections between the aims of ERB and Ethics and Aistear**

Specific aims of ERB and Ethics	Aims of Aistear
Personal Understanding	<p>Children will have strong self-identities and will feel respected and affirmed as unique individuals with their own life stories (I&amp;B)</p> <p>Children will have a sense of group identity where links with their family and community are acknowledged and extended (I&amp;B)</p> <p>Children will see themselves as capable learners (I&amp;B)</p> <p>Children will use non-verbal communication skills (C)</p> <p>Children will use language (listening, speaking, signing, drawing, and writing) (C)</p> <p>Children will broaden their understanding of the world by making sense of experiences through language (listening, speaking, signing, drawing, and writing) (C)</p>
Mutual Understanding	<p>Children will be able to express their rights and show an understanding and regard for the identity, rights and views of others (I&amp;B)</p>
Spiritual Awareness	<p>Children will be creative and spiritual (WB)</p> <p>Children will express themselves creatively and imaginatively (C)</p>
Character Education	<p>Children will be strong psychologically and socially (WB)</p> <p>Children will be as healthy and fit as they can be (WB)</p> <p>Children will have positive attitudes towards learning and develop dispositions like curiosity, playfulness, perseverance, confidence, resourcefulness, and risk-taking. (E&amp;T)</p>
Connection to the Wider World	<p>Children will have positive outlooks on learning and on life (WB)</p> <p>Children will learn about and make sense of the world around them (E&amp;T)</p> <p>Children will develop and use skills and strategies for observing, questioning, investigating, understanding, negotiating, and problem-solving, and come to see themselves as explorers and thinkers (E&amp;T)</p> <p>Children will explore ways to represent ideas, feelings, thoughts, objects, and actions through symbols (E&amp;T)</p>

Key: 4 Themes of Aistear Identity and Belonging (I&B), Communicating (C), Wellbeing (WB), Exploring and Thinking (E&T)

**How will the aims for ERB and Ethics connect with Junior Cycle?**

<sup>1</sup> Available online at [www.ncca.ie/earlylearning](http://www.ncca.ie/earlylearning).

The proposed ERB component of the curriculum will draw connections with the Junior Cycle Religious Education syllabus at post primary. The syllabus for Junior Cycle Religious Education is organised into two parts with three sub-sections in each:

**Table 4: Areas of study in the Junior Cycle Religious Education syllabus**

<b>Part 1</b> ( <i>students may pick two of the following to study</i> )	Communities of Faith
	Foundations of Religion – Christianity
	Foundations of Religion – Major World Religions
<b>Part 2</b> ( <i>students take all of the following</i> )	The Question of Faith
	The Celebration of Faith
	The Moral Challenge

Students may pick two of the three areas of study in part one and complete all three areas of part two. It would seem that there will be natural connections between ERB content and the strand of ‘Foundations of Religions-Major World Religions’ at Junior Cycle. It will be important that the ERB component of the curriculum has recognised connections with Religious Education in Junior Cycle especially in the senior end of primary school.

Likewise in the case of the Ethics component of the proposed curriculum, connections to the Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) syllabus at Junior Cycle may be made. Concepts such as rights and responsibilities, human dignity, development, democracy and stewardship found in CSPE may have connections to what is developed for Ethics in primary schools.

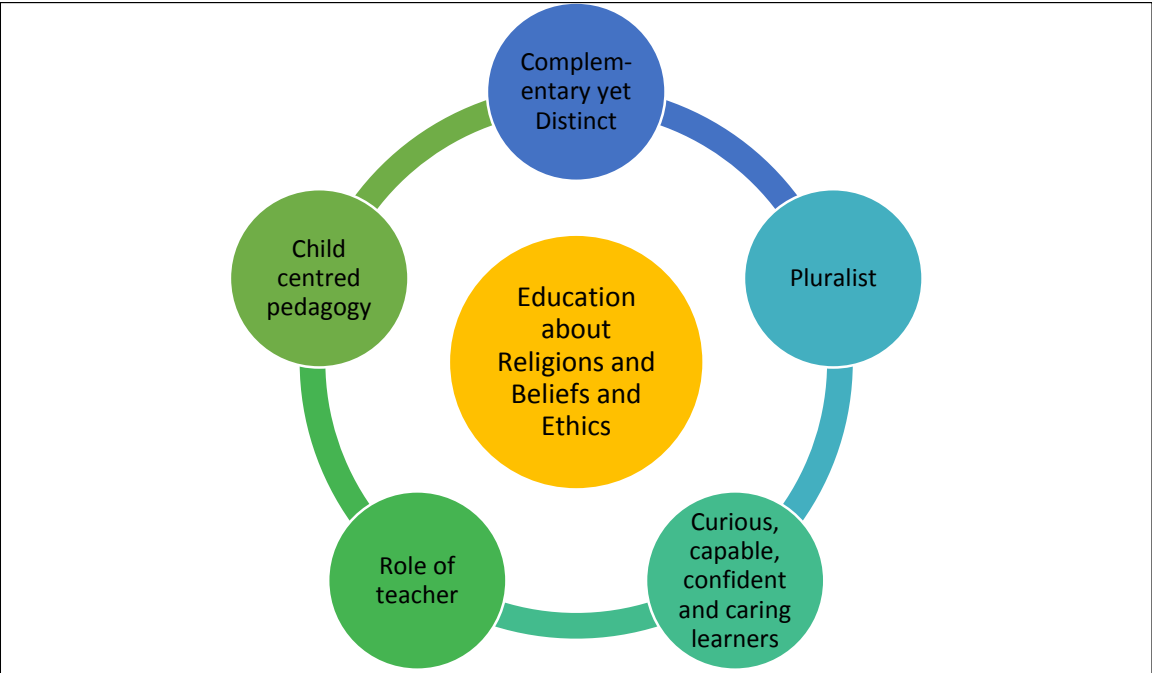
The developmental appropriateness of a curriculum for ERB and Ethics is an important consideration. How children learn changes over time, cognitively, socially and emotionally. Teaching and learning may look quite different in the junior and senior classes of the primary school. Continuity of progression and minimal overlapping of content at the senior end of primary to post-primary school is a consideration for the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics.

# Curriculum features

Knowledge and understanding of religions, beliefs and ethics are important elements of a quality education which fosters democratic citizenship, nurtures mutual respect, enhances religious freedom and promotes an understanding of diversity. This section proposes five key features of a curriculum for ERB and Ethics. These are outlined as, ERB and Ethics:

- are complementary yet distinct areas of education
- are pluralist in nature
- will value the child as a curious, capable, confident and caring individual
- will recognise the critical role of teachers as nurturing children’s dispositions
- embodies a child-centred pedagogy.

Figure 2: The five features of curriculum development for ERB and Ethics



## 1. ERB and Ethics are complementary yet distinct

For the purposes of curriculum development, it is of interest, and indeed necessary, to consider ERB and Ethics as two related but distinct areas of education. While both contribute greatly to the development of respect, understanding and empathy towards others in society, each are significant areas of study in their own right, requiring different skills, knowledge and approaches in their teaching

and learning. It is proposed that both ERB and Ethics are developed as distinct yet complementary components of the primary curriculum.

Together, ERB and Ethics seek to nurture human potential and improve the quality of life for children. Working in tandem, they can develop an understanding of religions and beliefs and promote the ideals of freedom, justice and dignity for all. ERB and Ethics helps meet the challenge of enabling children develop empathy and positive attitudes toward different cultural, racial, and ethnic groups in an increasingly pluralistic environment.

While ERB focuses on fostering an informed awareness of the main theist, non-theist, and secular beliefs including key aspects of their cultural manifestations, Ethics focuses on expanding the child's moral imagination enabling the development of his/her moral sense, which is indispensable for making judicious choices. Ethics education contributes to the development of autonomous individuals, capable of exercising critical judgment, while also fostering dialogue and community life in a pluralist society. ERB aims to foster a respect, understanding of and empathy for members of all religions, beliefs and world views. Both nurture skills and dispositions required for young people to live in and contribute to a diverse society.

## 2. ERB and Ethics are pluralist in nature

The educational vision underpinning an ERB and Ethics curriculum is for an authentic pluralism<sup>2</sup> and values education which enables both children and teachers in our schools to live in, and contribute positively, to our transforming, diverse society. As outlined in the Primary School Curriculum: Introduction (NCCA, 1999) under the sub-section Key Issues in Primary Education, a pluralist approach *'equally recognises the diversity of beliefs, values and aspirations of all religious and cultural groups in society'* (p. 28).

Pluralism places value on a range of views rather than a single approach or method of interpretation of life. ERB and Ethics will recognise the variety of understandings and expressions of religions and beliefs that are shaped by cultural and individual circumstances and experience. It will give due attention and respect to the diversity within religions and beliefs to avoid falling into the trap of broad generalisations or stereotyping. ERB and Ethics will draw upon the experience of children, through the

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<sup>2</sup> Authentic pluralism fosters a culture that honours religious difference. It affirms the right of all human beings to believe and practice their faith, not only in their private lives but also in the public space. Authentic pluralism does not minimise religious differences by saying that 'all religions are ultimately the same' instead it encourages conversations and discussions across divides of difference.

exploration of their identity and belonging, providing opportunity to express themselves in terms of their ethnic, faith and belief backgrounds.

### 3. ERB and Ethics will value the child as a curious, capable, confident and caring individual

Building upon representations of the child in the 1999 curriculum (DES, 1999) and in Aistear (NCCA, 2009), the image of the child in the proposed ERB and Ethics curriculum is one of a curious, capable, confident and caring individual. The curriculum also recognises children as being fully human and as such exhibiting flaws that are a feature of the human condition. Children are understood as social actors who actively participate in and co-construct their knowledge, identity and culture with peers and adults. The proposed curriculum will recognise the richness of each child's experience shaped by a unique combination of conditions which include, among others, family dynamics, relationships, cultural norms, societal expectations and religious customs.

In Ireland children encounter and interact with a variety of cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic groupings. As children grow and develop their encounters with diverse groups, with differing opinions and perspectives, can become more complex and tensions can occur. Children's engagement with these tensions is an important feature of a pluralist society. Presenting the child as a 'caring' individual recognises the innate goodness within the child and his/her ability to relate to those with whom they disagree.

While the child brings his/her own ideas and beliefs about the world to ERB and Ethics, it is also an opportunity for them to experience the beliefs and the ideas of other children. Children through ERB and Ethics children will be given the skills to actively participate in and contribute to inter-belief dialogue, share ideas about the world and promote relationships and friendships with children of different faith and belief backgrounds. Such dialogue will take different forms depending on the age and stage of children. It can also support children in developing the foundations of critical thinking and questioning. Disagreement and tensions are features of human interaction and as such the proposed curriculum in ERB and Ethics will promote active tolerance and respectful disagreement with those of opposing views. Through a child's reflection on their own beliefs and values, and those of others, they will grow in respect for themselves and others.

Children's active engagement in ethics will contribute to their awareness of the complexities of human behaviour and promote the development of skills and dispositions required to live and contribute in a positive way to a diverse society. Children will actively develop a respectful tolerance for the right to hold a particular belief or attitude; they will nurture sensitivity to the diversity of religions and

beliefs as an element contributing to the richness of society. Children will engage in and promote communication and dialogue between people of different cultural, religious and non-religious backgrounds. These will help combat prejudice and stereotypes, which are barriers to intercultural dialogue (Council of Europe, 2014, p. 4).

In light of this socio-cultural approach consideration needs to be given to the experience of the child and the introduction of worldviews beyond his/her experience. In terms of teaching Ethics, it may be appropriate to have such teaching continue through all years at primary, while discrete ERB teaching may be more appropriate from the middle to the senior end of primary school when children's sense of identity and belonging have been established. This is an important consideration in the development of the proposed curriculum for ERB and Ethics.

#### 4. ERB and Ethics will recognise the role of teachers as nurturing children's dispositions

In a learning environment where children are no longer passive consumers of facts but active participants in and creators of knowledge, the teacher is seen as having a key role in the fostering of positive dispositions in the classroom. It has been shown that through the nurturing of positive dispositions children are more likely to repeat an activity, thereby developing skills along with improved understanding and knowledge. Over time, children become increasingly confident and are intrinsically motivated to learn (Hohmann and Weikart, 1995). This illustrates the interconnectedness of the development of concepts, dispositions and skills and has implications for classroom practice and the role of the teacher.

We know that dispositions are not taught in the formal sense of instruction. Children develop these through rich and generative interactions with teachers. It has been shown that children who learn actively have positive dispositions to learning and in turn an active and stimulating environment improves neural connections which aid the later learning of skills, acquisition of knowledge and understanding of concepts (Karr-Morse and Wiley, 1997). This has an impact on the teacher's practice in the classroom, highlighting the importance of a stimulating, respectful environment along with active and meaningful activities which promote a positive disposition to learning.

In the nurturing of positive dispositions for the concepts of ERB and Ethics it is important that teachers are aware of their own value base. No subject or teaching is value-free. Therefore, teachers need to be conscious of their own convictions and beliefs and how these influence their approach to the

teaching of the proposed curriculum in ERB and Ethics. Remaining mindful of the difficulties of presenting any curriculum in a manner that is impartial and free of bias, it is nonetheless essential that the classroom encourages secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships that value diversity among children and promotes the practice of inclusion. It ensures that the rights of all children are respected, protected and fulfilled, and allows for the voices of all children to be heard. In short, what is called for is the teaching of ERB and Ethics to be *'objective, critical and pluralist'* in nature (ODIHR, 2007, p. 68, 88, 104).

While teachers do require knowledge about the different religions and beliefs in their classroom, they do not need to be experts in the various beliefs and traditions. A child-centred approach requires the teacher to be a facilitator in the child's learning process; to listen effectively and facilitate good questioning among children. Empowering children to lead aspects of lessons by relating teaching to their personal experience of religion and beliefs provides an environment where teachers and children are partners in education. Staying open-minded, fair, balanced and non-judgmental is important. Teachers when dealing with their *'unknowingness'* of religions, beliefs and cultures become co-learners in this dynamic, fostering a disposition of openness and flexibility.

This places great demands on teacher's self-efficacy, professional ethics, knowledge and skills. There is also the challenge for teachers who will be engaged in teaching denominational programmes and faith forming on the one hand; and teaching about religions and beliefs from a pluralist perspective on the other. There is no doubt that it also brings into sharp relief the need for teacher education and continual support for professionals in meeting these challenges.

## 5. ERB and Ethics will embody a child-centred pedagogy

As in the 1999 curriculum (DES, 1999) and Aistear (NCCA, 2008), ERB and Ethics recognises the child's ability to actively engage in and shape the educational process in partnership with the adult. In a child-centred pedagogy teachers play the role of facilitator in the child's learning process, promoting tolerance and acceptance, nurturing respect, fostering dialogue and inviting the child to engage with the educational process. Though their knowledge of the content remains important, interactive techniques such as discussion, debate, research, group work, project work, drama and collaborative learning play a prominent role.

Pedagogies which are inquiry-based and constructivist, and which value philosophical inquiry with children would seem appropriate for such teaching. These methods seek to synthesise and balance the most important aspects of the study of religion, belief and ethics for children, going beyond merely descriptive or detached approaches. Through these pedagogies learning about and learning from

religions, beliefs and ethics combine, and resulting from engagement in this process, children gain greater understanding of themselves and others.

Research and development have highlighted the cultural and social nature of children's learning whereby children learn, not in isolation, but with and within their family, neighbours and community (French, 2007). Through these different relationships children learn about and from their world. Trust, respect, love, and care are at the heart of the relationships which enable children to grow, learn and develop. This sociocultural perspective takes account of the central role of social interaction in shaping learning. Sociocultural theories also consider culture and cultural influences as centrally important to learning. A curriculum in ERB and Ethics can engage with the sociocultural approach, fostering teacher-and-child and child-and-child relationships in the shared space of the classroom.

For ERB an appropriate pedagogy that incorporates constructivist<sup>3</sup> and inquiry-based approaches with a learning from religion approach is the Interpretative Approach (Jackson, 1997) to Religious Education. This approach is critical of simplistic representations of the relationship between religion and culture which see religions and cultures as homogeneous and distinct from one another.

This approach involves three elements:

### **1. Representation**

Religions and beliefs are described in terms of a relationship between individuals within the context of particular groups and wider religious traditions. The study of individuals, in the context of the various groups with which they are associated, informs an emerging understanding of religious traditions. At the same time, key concepts from the religions are exemplified and enlivened through the consideration of particular examples of religious faith and practice. When it comes to pedagogy in this approach, it does not matter whether you start with an overview of key concepts from a tradition, a personal story (whether that be from a visitor to the school or from some other source), the study of a group of some kind, or children's own previous knowledge and experience (including their own experience of religious practice or the absence of religion from their lives).

### **2. Interpretation**

Rather than asking children to leave their assumptions to one side, this method requires a comparison and contrast between the child's concepts and those of the *'insider'*. The

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<sup>3</sup> Constructivist approaches to education asserts that children generate knowledge and meaning from interactions between their experiences and their ideas.



approach employs a movement backwards and forwards between the child's and the 'insider's' concepts and experiences. Entering into a dialogue with the 'insider' requires sensitivity on the part of the child and is a necessary condition for empathy.

**3. Reflexivity**

In order to increase understanding, children need to reflect on the impact of their new learning on their previous understanding. This approach gives the child an active involvement in the learning process. Reflexivity covers various aspects of the relationship between the experience of children and the experience of those whose way of life they are attempting to interpret. The aim is to encourage reflection and constructive criticism to give a voice to children, allowing them to gain insight from their peers and to be able to examine different ideas of truth held within the classroom.

In the area of ethics, an appropriate pedagogy may be an active learning approach, considering real life situations and promoting critical knowledge in and understanding of human rights, while also promoting a proactive approach to living in a democratic society. Coupled with a pluralist perspective, this pedagogical approach will engage children with ethical issues from their perspective, while considering the perspectives of others. Children will debate, investigate, imagine, predict, record and critically analyse ethical tensions that arise from living in a diverse society.

Some suggested methods of teaching and learning for both ERB and Ethics are detailed in Figure 3 below.

**Figure 3: Suggested methods of teaching and learning in ERB and Ethics**



The approaches and methods outlined above are an initial exploration of possibilities for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics and many are already familiar to teachers and children.

# Approaches to curriculum development

We are not starting with a clean slate with the introduction of a curriculum for ERB and Ethics. The development of a curriculum in this area coincides with other changes to the primary curriculum beginning with a new curriculum for Language and Mathematics, and the development of a new Primary Curriculum Framework. A key priority of curriculum revision in these areas, is the need to address, and ultimately to reduce curriculum overload.

The question then of what this curriculum will look like becomes a matter of debate. Will ERB and Ethics be a curriculum area, similar to Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE), with subjects relating to ERB and Ethics under its umbrella? Will ERB and Ethics be under the umbrella of another curriculum area, perhaps called 'Wellbeing' or 'Identity and Belonging', with other subjects such as Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) contributing to the curriculum area? Will ERB and Ethics be two separate subjects, with two rationales, two sets of aims and two sets of learning outcomes? Or will ERB and Ethics be a framework, like Aistear or Junior Cycle, setting out broad learning outcomes within which schools have flexibility in mediating the curriculum? Furthermore depending on answers to the questions above, how will a child's achievement in ERB and Ethics be assessed and reported to parents? The answers to these significant questions will be informed through this consultation and will guide the work for the development of the proposed curriculum.

## *Time allocation for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics*

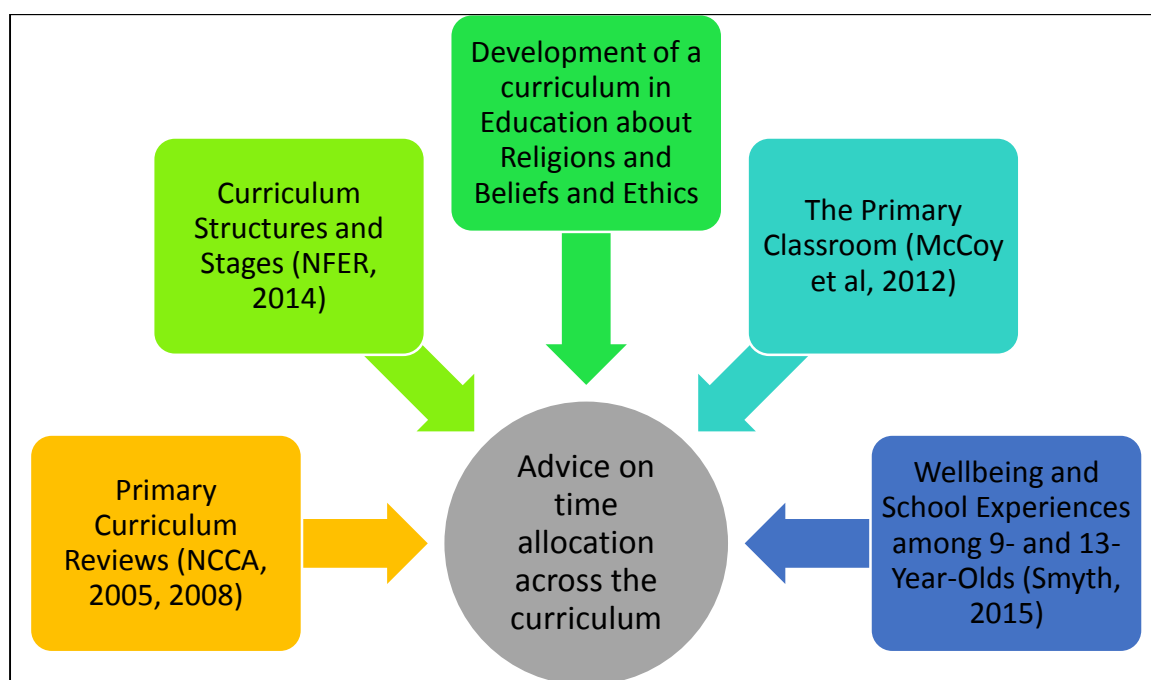
A question which requires consideration in the development of ERB and Ethics, is that of time allocation during the school day. The expanding curriculum has been noted as problematic in curriculum reviews (NCCA, 2010, p. 16) and teachers have described the Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999) as having too many subjects (NCCA 2005; 2008a). The *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life strategy* refers to this stating that:

*Teachers and principals say that they have insufficient time to address all of the objectives that are contained in the Primary School Curriculum and that the inclusion of new areas of learning may have compromised their ability to teach core skills such as literacy and numeracy. (DES, 2011, p. 49)*

Furthermore as part of the strategy the NCCA is required to advise the Minister on revising the time allocations outlined in the 1999 Primary School Curriculum in 2016. The NCCA is currently considering its advice on this matter and is influenced by research in the area such as the *'Wellbeing and School Experiences among 9- and 13-Year-Olds: Insights from the Growing Up in Ireland Study'* (Smyth, 2015), *'Curriculum Structures and Stages in Primary Education: Audit of Policy Across Jurisdictions'* (NFER,

2014), *'The Primary Classroom: Insights from the Growing Up in Ireland Study'* (McCoy et al, 2012) and *'Curriculum Overload in Primary Schools: Experiences and reflections from the Learning Site'* (NCCA, 2010). The NCCA will also take into consideration the developments in the primary curriculum that are already underway namely a new Language Curriculum, a new Mathematics Curriculum and the development of a new Primary Curriculum Framework.

**Figure 4: Considerations in the allocation of time across the Primary School Curriculum**



The question of how to develop a curriculum for ERB and Ethics, without adding to curriculum overload whilst ensuring it makes meaningful change in classrooms, is worth considering in this context. The advice to be issued on time allocation will need to be cognisant of the experience of teachers and the ongoing work on the primary curriculum while also taking into account appropriate learning experiences for all children. The approaches outlined below are intended to stimulate discussion and invite feedback on how ERB and Ethics will fit in the current curriculum structure.

## Exploring approaches to curriculum development for ERB and Ethics

To explore the development of a curriculum for ERB and Ethics in the primary curriculum four approaches are outlined below, they are:

- ERB and Ethics as part of the patron’s programme
- ERB and Ethics integrated across curriculum areas
- ERB and Ethics as a discrete curriculum

- ERB and Ethics as having both discrete and integrated components

### 1. *ERB and Ethics as part of the patron's programme*

There are strong possibilities for connection between the current content of religion, belief systems and ethics in patrons' programmes and the content of a curriculum for ERB and Ethics. With regard to ERB, the references to '*world religions*', '*inter-faith dialogue*' and more recently, the concept of '*religious literacy*', are significant developments in some patrons' programmes. Similarly, the emphasis on character education, moral norms and attitudes in other patron programmes can connect directly to a curriculum in Ethics. On the other hand, patrons' programmes tend to draw on a realist epistemology while many suggest that ERB and Ethics should draw on a critical, pluralist and inquiry based epistemology. This approach emphasises autonomy in learning and understanding. While the majority of patrons' programmes are conceived through a '*faith lens*', a national curriculum in ERB and Ethics may be based on a more pluralist epistemology which explores different faiths and beliefs without promoting one faith perspective above another. These epistemological differences may also be reflected in the associated pedagogy of each programme/curriculum.

Although some patrons' programmes refer to moral and ethical content to a significant extent, some of these are developed from a faith perspective in denominational schools. In contrast, the moral and ethical content of the proposed curriculum for ERB and Ethics is intended to be grounded in a pluralist and values education perspective. In this way a curriculum for ERB and Ethics will be inclusive of all children regardless of their belief tradition.

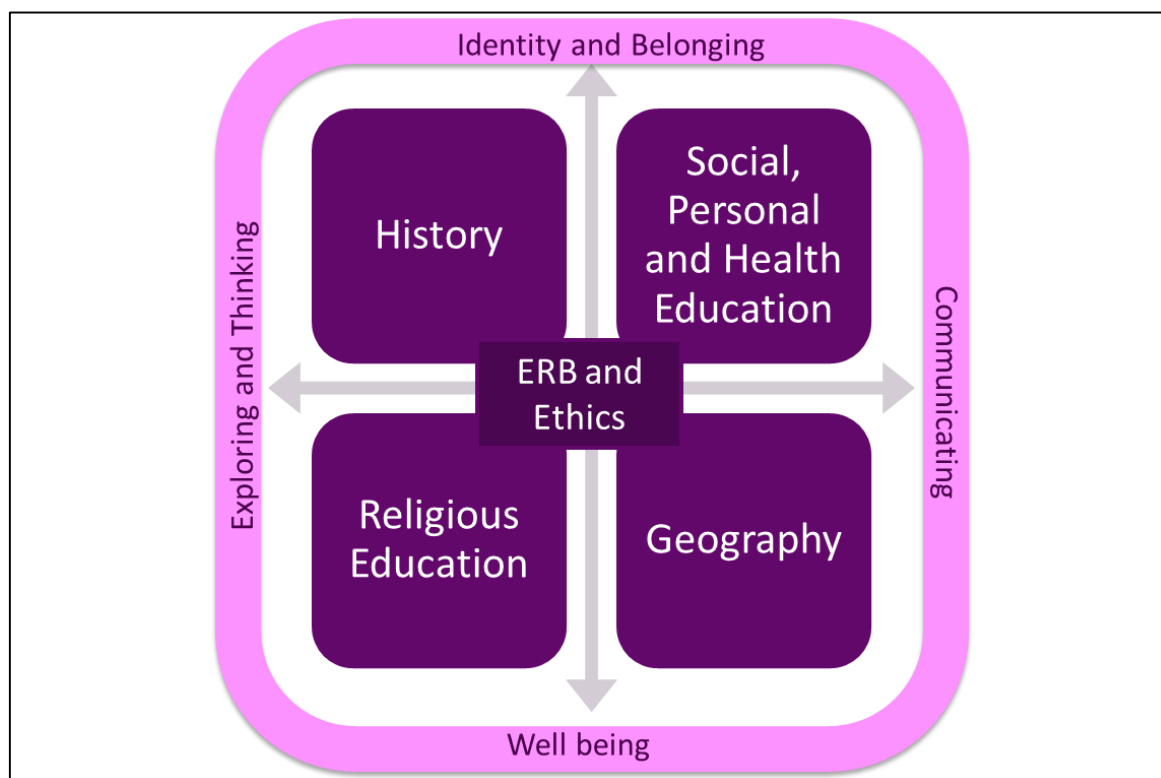
There is also particular concern for children who 'opt out' of the patron's programme on the grounds of conscience. The integration of ERB and Ethics content into the patron's programme of the school may result in these children continuing to miss out on this valuable teaching and learning. For this reason it would seem ineffective to integrate ERB and Ethics into these programmes.

### 2. *ERB and Ethics integrated across curriculum areas*

There is potential for the integration of content from ERB and Ethics across the curriculum. As noted above, there is the case for connectivity with Religious Education programmes currently in schools and the proposed ERB curriculum. Other closely related areas of curriculum are Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE), and there are possibilities for integration across all areas, not simply in terms of content but also in terms of pedagogy. For example, drama pedagogy seems particularly suited to the exploration of topics in ERB and Ethics.

The four themes of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) also have recognisable links to the proposed contents of ERB and Ethics. The figure below illustrates the connections the proposed curriculum for ERB and Ethics has across and within the subjects of the 1999 curriculum and the themes of Aistear.

**Figure 5: Connections between ERB and Ethics and curriculum areas and themes of Aistear**



However, there is a danger that as integrated content alone it might prove difficult for ERB and Ethics to have the impact to have an impact on children’s learning; as detailed in the general aims on page 13 of this paper.

The significant changes proposed with the introduction of a curriculum for ERB and Ethics may need fore-fronting in the curriculum space if the curriculum is to make a meaningful contribution to the lives of children in Irish primary schools. Although drawing connections to the contents of ERB and Ethics from other curriculum areas will aid the holistic understanding of the material, it is doubtful that integration of ERB and Ethics content alone will have a significant impact on the practice of teaching and the learning experiences of children in this regard.

### *3. ERB and Ethics as a distinct curriculum*

This approach recognises the need for all children to have teaching in ERB and Ethics. It restates the proposal above that a curriculum for ERB and Ethics, while connecting in clear ways to religious and moral content in patrons’ programmes, should be seen as a distinct area of curriculum within the State curriculum.

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This approach can be argued for in the following ways:

- ERB and Ethics may be grounded in an inquiry-based epistemology, exploring different religions, beliefs and worldviews without promoting one faith perspective over another. For the majority of primary schools, this involves a new way of approaching religion, belief and ethics from anything developed previously.
- In teacher education, in some colleges, the Ethics and Education (also involving ERB) curriculum for student teachers has been developed as a result of the recommendations of the Forum's Report (Coolahan et al, 2012). Here, the curriculum in ethical and comparative religious education was developed as an independent curriculum, clearly distinct from existing religious, faith-based teacher education curricula. This would seem to set a useful precedent for the development of an independent ERB and Ethics curriculum for primary school children.

This approach towards curriculum development takes its cue from the need for this provision in schools in recent times. Internationally, this is in line with good educational practice, referring back to the Toledo Guidelines on Teaching Religion and Beliefs (ODIHR, 2007) and the increased recent emphasis on '*religious literacy*' and the concept of '*learning from religion*' (as distinct from simply '*learning about religion*').

#### 4. *ERB and Ethics as having both discrete and integrated components*

The separation of ERB and Ethics as two complementary yet distinct areas of education is an important consideration in this context. The question of whether to integrate ERB and Ethics across the curriculum or to have them as two distinct curriculum specifications may be served by considering ERB and Ethics separately.

For instance it may be appropriate that the proposed ERB component of the curriculum remain as a distinct specification, as it would seem to have its own distinct content and approaches. This recognises the need for national provision of such teaching in Irish primary schools, which has been lacking in the past. Ethics may be best situated within or across curriculum areas, making connections with existing strands and units in subjects. This approach recognises the provision of ethical teaching across many areas of the curriculum. Much ethical learning occurs during the teaching of SPHE, but is also found across many subjects for example in Geography during the teaching of the '*Environmental Awareness and Care*' strand.

The integration of the Ethics component may enhance the opportunities for such teaching to be highlighted as important to all curriculum areas and not only during specific strands and units. Fronting Ethics teaching in curriculum areas will emphasise the need to foster ethical attitudes at all

times during the school day. This approach may impact on teacher overload and also on the time needed to teach the new curriculum.

The four approaches presented above are not intended to be exhaustive of the options available for the development of a curriculum in ERB and Ethics. As outlined earlier the answers to the questions of whether ERB and Ethics will evolve into a curriculum area in itself, or as part of a curriculum area, or as two subjects, or as a framework for schools will be informed through this consultative process.



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## Concluding remarks

The development of a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics breaks new ground in the Irish education system. Curriculum change in any context is often challenging, involving a great deal of deliberation to ensure appropriate change manifests. The current debates about school patronage and choice in our education system gives rise to additional sensitivities over and above the general discussions about curriculum change in Ireland. While remaining mindful of such wider systemic matters, this consultation focuses on the proposals for a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics.

The development of the proposed curriculum is concerned with what children should learn in primary school and for what purpose. This paper presents a curriculum that will enable children to foster a sense of identity and belonging by developing their self-awareness, self-confidence, self-esteem and, ultimately, their happiness. The curriculum presented enables children to develop an acceptance of the right to hold a particular belief or attitude; to be sensitive to the diversity of religions and beliefs of others and the contribution this diversity makes to the richness of communities. The curriculum also enables children to engage in and promote communication and dialogue between people of different cultural, religious and non-religious backgrounds; and to contest prejudice and the worst effects of stereotyping. The development of these skills enables children to come to a deeper understanding of themselves, their world and their place in it; while enabling them to contribute positively to their communities.

The consultation on the proposals for a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics will run from autumn to spring 2016. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment accept written submissions, completed questionnaires and contributions made during our consultation events; which will be advertised on our web site. To find out more and how to contribute please visit [www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe](http://www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe).



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## Appendix 1: Glossary

This note on terminology has been created to clarify the meaning of important terms used in this paper relating to Religious Education, Ethics and patronage in primary schools. In line with the report of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector (Coolahan et al, 2012) the explanations aim to provide clarity and to reflect current literature in the field, while being mindful of the sensitivities involved.

**Character education:** is a concept that encapsulates and appreciation that people's rights also imply responsibilities, the development of a sense of conscience, the recognition of the importance of personal integrity and the promotion an active tolerance and respect across religious/cultural divides.

**Denominational Religious Education:** This means education as formation in a belief system. Faith formation involves learning how to live a life according to religious guidelines. It also involves learning modes of thinking, values formation, moral action and integration into a faith community in the light of one religious belief. It incorporates the constitutional and legal term 'religious instruction' whose connotation is now regarded as pedagogically limiting, but whose usage was widespread in the past.

**Denominational patronage:** A denominational school is under the patronage of a single denominational group. Denominational schools provide Religious Education according to the traditions, practices and beliefs of the specified religious community. It may also provide a wider education about religions or facilitate parents of other faith traditions to enable them to provide for Religious Education in their belief system within the school or at home.

**Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB):** ERB helps pupils to know about and to understand the cultural heritage of the major forms of religion, belief traditions and world views which have been embraced by humankind. It is not focussed on nurturing a belief or practice system of any one religion, instead it focuses on fostering an informed awareness of the main theist, non-theist, and secular beliefs including key aspects of their cultural manifestations. ERB aims to foster a respect, understanding and empathy for members of diverse religions, beliefs and worldviews.

**Ethics Education:** The teaching of ethics includes the formation in and the promotion of a personal commitment to the dignity and freedom of all human beings, the importance of human rights and responsibilities, the place of justice within society, and the service of the common good. These are all essential to education for citizenship and the proper functioning of democracy. Learning about ethics is important for all, but developing modes of ethical behaviour is of central importance to human development.

**Ethos:** In a formal sense ethos may be considered as an expression of an institution’s aims, objectives, goals, values and beliefs, which the school aspires to, endorses and preserves. Ethos also places an emphasis on the unavoidable exposure and immersion by all within an organisation to a prescribed set of values and beliefs. In this context, school ethos has been defined as ‘the atmosphere that emerges from the interaction of a number of aspects of school life, including teaching and learning, management and leadership, the use of images and symbols, rituals and practices, as well as goals and expectations’ (Norman, 2003).

**Inter-denominational patronage:** A school under the patronage or trusteeship of more than one religious faith community, generally under a joint Catholic/Protestant religious ethos, is described as inter-denominational (INTO, 2003). Members of both denominations are involved in the establishment of the schools, and RE programmes of both denominations are taught. Some schools under the patronage of An Foras Patrúnachta offer an inter-denominational ethos.

**Multi-denominational patronage:** Multi-denominational schools uphold, respect and accept equality of beliefs, whether religious or non-religious, and celebrate diverse lifestyles held by children, parents, staff and members of the wider community. In the Irish context, two types of primary schools are categorised as multi-denominational:

- Firstly, those schools that do not provide Religious Education as formation, during the school day, but do provide education about religions and beliefs. If they so desire, parents may arrange for denominational Religious Education outside school hours in such schools. Educate Together is an example of this form of multi-denominational education.
- Secondly, those schools that provide education about religions and beliefs while also providing faith nurturing for different denominations, depending on parental requests, during the school day. Community National Schools are an example of this form of multi- denominational education.

**The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector:** This forum was launched in April 2011 by government to recognise and begin to respond to the need for appropriate forms of primary school patronage for Ireland’s increasingly diverse society. Professor John Coolahan (Chair), Dr. Caroline Hussey and Ms. Fionnuala Kilfeather were appointed as members of the independent Advisory Group. The Advisory Group received and listened to submissions from parents, patrons, teachers and the wider community. The Forum’s Report, including recommendations, was published a year after its launch in April 2012.

**Patron:** The definition of a school patron in Ireland and the legal basis of its role and duties, are set out in a variety of documents and legal Acts which include: The Constitution of Ireland (1937), Education Act (1998), Education (Welfare) Act (2000), The Rules for National Schools (1965) and the Constitution of Boards and Rules of Procedure (2007). The key responsibilities of the patron involves promotion of school ethos, appointment and support of the board of management, financial and legal matters, the upkeep of assets and the supervision of staff appointments in accordance with department regulations.

**Patron's Programme:** This refers to the programme or curriculum developed by a patron to underpin and promote the ethos of their schools. The Education Act (1998) recognises the legal right for patrons to design, supervise, implement and teach their programmes. For the majority of patrons their programme addresses the area of religious education.

**Pluralism:** The term 'pluralism' is used in two ways in the document:

- As a form of society in which the members of minority groups maintain their independent cultural traditions.<sup>4</sup>
- As an epistemological principle, recognising the right to the existence of contradictory truth claims or worldviews. This approach is chiefly concerned with the dialogue and discussion between various groups of people of different belief backgrounds and is understood as integral to promoting inclusive school communities.

**Religious Education (RE):** For the purposes of this paper RE is understood as one of seven curriculum areas and 12 subjects in the Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999, Introduction, p.40). In this paper RE refers to a curriculum space which includes denominational and multi- denominational teaching of religion. The subject, RE, is found in different forms and under different titles around the world. Terms such as Religious Studies (Northern Ireland, Finland and the Netherlands), Religion (Sweden), Christian Studies (Denmark), Religious and Moral Education (Germany and Scotland), Religion, Philosophies of Life and Ethics (Norway) and Ethics, Culture and Religion (Quebec, Canada) are all used to describe Religious Education.

**Spiritual awareness:** For the purposes of this paper spiritual awareness relates to both inner understanding and relational understanding of the world around us. Spiritual awareness requires a

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<sup>4</sup> Taken from the Oxford English Dictionary, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/pluralism> , 24/3/15

profound understanding of one's inner self while also holding that the individual is part of something greater than themselves.



## Appendix 2: Key messages from research

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

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

### **Encountering Children in an Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics Curriculum- an educational and child's rights perspective**

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

The key messages from this paper include:

- A curriculum for ERB and Ethics should encapsulate the five aims of education as outlined in Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child<sup>5</sup>.

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The five aims of education as outlined in Article 29 states:

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

- The child is viewed as a *capable, confident, curious* and *caring* individual who actively participates and contributes to their culture and education.
- A socio-cultural approach, taking into account the key role of interactions and relationships, is a feature of effective ERB and Ethics teaching.
- The child's ability to actively engage in and shape the educational process, in partnership with the adult, encourages a sense of identity with and belonging to their families, their schools and their communities; as active participants in these spaces.
- Children have the ability to learn from religions and beliefs through '*participating in culture*', shared talk and shared activities. Through these processes the child comes to a deeper understanding of themselves, their world and their place and role in it.

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

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

To read more visit: [www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe](http://www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe)

### **National Foundation of Educational Research-Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics in Primary Schools**

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) audit outlines the provision of Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics across jurisdictions<sup>6</sup> to inform the development of a curriculum in Ireland.

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

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<sup>6</sup> Jurisdictions included in the study: Australia, Queensland, New Zealand, Canada, Québec, Northern Ireland, England, Scotland, Finland, Singapore, France, Sweden, Ireland, USA – Massachusetts, Netherlands and Wales.

- Generally there is a national curriculum that is mediated locally by teachers and schools. This involves developing an enabling framework within which schools have the autonomy to mediate and negotiate the curriculum at local level, in line with the needs of their school community.
- Common principles for ERB curricula include: freedom of religion; fostering pupils' awareness of and respect for diversity; encouraging mutual understanding between peoples; Christian heritage; living in a pluralist society.
- Education about Religions and Beliefs generally begins with the prevalent religion of the society in which it is being taught and is then widened to include a range of worldviews.
- A spiral approach to curriculum design is a common feature across jurisdictions. This may involve creating strand and strand units or elements that stretch across developmental stages of education, enabling the child to connect at a deeper level as they engage with the concepts of curriculum.
- Québec<sup>7</sup>, Queensland and New Zealand<sup>8</sup> are examples of jurisdictions that have taken significant steps in the development of ERB curricula and may have useful learning for NCCA.

The key messages for the provision of Ethics Education include:

- Ethics is generally an overarching principle of curriculum or integrated across curriculum areas and rarely a discrete subject. In two jurisdictions it is combined with ERB to form a distinct subject.
- Common principles of Ethics curricula include: ethics will help young people to understand and develop a personal commitment to the dignity and freedom of all human beings, the importance of human rights, the place of justice within society and the service of the common good.
- Where ethics is taught as a discrete subject it is generally referred to as citizenship education.

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

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<sup>7</sup> Québec has recently completed the process of shifting from an essentially denominational Catholic and Protestant structure of religious education to a 'lay' structure, with the introduction of their 'Ethics and Religious Culture' programme.

<sup>8</sup> Both Queensland and New Zealand have provided the space for both ERB and Denominational Religious Education in their national curriculum frameworks. Queensland allow up to 40 hours annually for Denominational Religious Education, while New Zealand allow up to 20 hours annually. Ireland allocates 92.5 hours annually to the teaching of the patron's programme.

To read more visit: [www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe](http://www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe).

## An Overview of Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics Content in Patrons' Programmes

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

**Table: Patron programmes present in Irish primary schools**

Patrons	Denominational Programme	Multi-denominational Programme
Catholic: <i>Alive-O<sup>9</sup>(Veritas, 1996-2004)</i>	★	
Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, Methodist, Quaker: <i>Follow Me Programme<sup>10</sup>(Board of Education and the General Synod of the Church of Ireland, 2004-2010)</i>	★	
Educate Together: <i>Learn Together Curriculum (Educate Together, 2004)</i>		★
Community National Schools: <i>Goodness Me, Goodness You! programme (NCCA, 2008-present)</i>		★
Jewish: <i>The Dublin Talmud Torah Jewish Studies Programme</i>	★	
Islamic: <i>Islamic Religious Education for Primary Level Programme (Islamic Foundation of Ireland, Yahya Al-Hussein, no date of publication provided)</i>	★	
John Scottus School Trust: <i>The John Scottus Philosophy Programme (John Scottus School, 1986-present)</i>		★

Some general messages from the study include:

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

<sup>9</sup> Alive-O is the programme currently in place in Catholic primary schools. A new programme, 'Grow in Love', is currently being developed and will be introduced to infant classes in September 2015. This overview has used the new Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum as it will replace the existing curriculum in the coming years.

<sup>10</sup> The Follow Me programme is a Christian inter-denominational programme. It is inter-denominational as it has been agreed by Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, Methodist and Quaker authorities in Ireland. As an agreed Christian curriculum it is categorised as 'denominational' in nature, as its teaching is that of a faith/Christian based perspective.

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

- There is a great variety in the supports provided for schools and teachers in the mediation of the patrons' programmes. Some patrons provide online resources, schools visits/inspections, teacher guidelines and pupil books, while others are limited by resources in the amount of support they can provide.
- There is a variation in the epistemological approaches advocated in teaching about religions and beliefs and ethics across patrons' programmes. There is evidence of socio-cultural, Socratic, pluralist, human rights and faith-based approaches.

Key messages for ERB:

- There is variation in provision for Education about Religions and Beliefs across programmes, particularly between denominational and multi-denominational patrons. In denominational programmes ERB occurs later in primary school (if at all), tends to be from a faith-based perspective and is generally confined to the three monotheist faiths of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. ERB in multi-denominational programmes tends to occur throughout primary school and involves learning about many religions and beliefs.
- Within the multi-denominational sector there are a variety of approaches to teaching about religions and beliefs. These range from a fact-based approach with discrete learning areas, to a multi-belief approach with a more integrated method of teaching about religions and beliefs.
- Teaching about religions and beliefs from a faith perspective is not a recommended approach for a national curriculum in ERB and developing a curriculum in ERB within this perspective is not appropriate for a national curriculum body to undertake.
- Multi- denominational approaches to ERB may have a contribution to make towards the development of a national curriculum in ERB.

Key messages for Ethics:

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

- Teaching Ethics through a faith lens is not a recommended approach for a national curriculum in Ethics.
- Multi-denominational approaches may have a contribution to make towards the development of a national curriculum for Ethics.

To read more visit: [www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe](http://www.ncca.ie/consultation/erbe).

The three pieces of research presented above have helped inform the development of the rationale, aims and vision presented in the following section, as well as contributing to an understanding of the potential features of curriculum in section 3.