EDUCATION ABOUT RELIGIONS AND BELIEFS (ERB) AND ETHICS

VIEWS OF TEACHERS, PARENTS AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC REGARDING THE PROPOSED CURRICULUM FOR PRIMARY SCHOOLS — CONSULTATION PAPER

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EVIDENCE FOR POLICY

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Views of Teachers, Parents and the General Public Regarding the Proposed Curriculum for Primary Schools

Consultation Paper Prepared for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)

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Acronyms

DES	Department of Education and Skills
ERB and Ethics	Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
RE	Religious education
RME	Religious and moral education
SESE	Social, environmental and scientific education
SPHE	Social, personal and health education

Chapter 1

Study Background and Rationale

1.1   INTRODUCTION

Current thinking on children's learning draws attention to young children's engagement with a range of settings, relationships, and activities, through which they acquire skills, competencies and identities (Valsiner, 2000). According to Bruner (1961), the purpose of education is not just to impart knowledge, but also to facilitate a child's thinking and problem-solving skills, which can then be transferred to a range of situations. He argued that education should also develop symbolic thinking in children and create autonomous learners. Initially, research on children's moral development emphasised the more or less seamless 'transmission' of religious and other beliefs from parents to children (see Bader and Desmond, 2006). However, a growing number of studies highlight the importance of child's own agency, that is, the way in which even young children do not necessarily adopt their parents' beliefs uncritically and develop a personalised sense of religion and belief in interaction with, but not determined by, their family and school context (Dillen, 2007; Hopkins et al., 2010; Boyatzis, 2009). Parents, siblings, peers and teachers are all seen as contributing towards the child's meaning-making as they introduce them to cultural practices and teach them new skills and ways of understanding the world (Rogoff, 1990; 2003). From this perspective, informed by socio-cultural theory, a child's understanding of the world around them, identity, belonging and moral understanding are firmly embedded in their broader development and learning.

The relative roles of the home and school in the development of children's dispositions have been the subject of much debate. While the development of a child's attitudes, habits and traits is primarily seen as the responsibility of parents (Katz, 1993), this goal is shared by other institutions, with the moral formation of children, development of the whole child and nurturing their sense of morality representing one of the aims of formal schooling (Lapsley, 2008; Wren, 2008). In Ireland, the primary school curriculum 'is designed to nurture the child in all dimensions of his or her life – spiritual, moral, cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social and physical' (Department of Education, 1999, p. 6). Schools can influence children's character development through the discussion of values in religious/moral education classes, through the kinds of role models offered by teachers to children, and through the quality of day-to-day interaction among the school community (Nucci, 2001).

How schools can facilitate the moral and ethical development of children has also been on the policy agenda in Ireland. The public discourse has largely focused on the nature of patronage for Irish primary schools. In 2011, the then Minister for Education and Skills, Mr. Ruairí Quinn, established the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector. An Advisory Group attached to the Forum sought submissions from parents, patrons, teachers and the wider community on proposed structural changes in the primary school sector. Following an extensive consultation process, a report by Coolahan et al. (2012) criticised the fact that, despite changes in the religious profile and extent of religious practice in Irish society, the majority of schools are still denominational in character. Concerns were also raised about the availability of alternative options for children of parents from minority religious groups or with no religious background. In this context, the report recommended the introduction of a common curriculum, Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics, for all primary school children. Following this recommendation, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment undertook a consultation about the content of such a curriculum. The broader consultation process involved seeking responses from a number of different groups of stakeholders in different fora. The focus of this consultation paper is to analyse the data generated by an online survey that targeted educators, parents and members of the general public. More specifically, the paper addresses the following research questions:

- To what extent do educators, parents and the general public agree with the proposed aims for the ERB and Ethics curriculum?

- What skills and dispositions do educators, parents and the general public expect the ERB and Ethics curriculum to develop?

- What methods and approaches are seen as most suitable for the delivery of the ERB and Ethics curriculum?

- From a policy perspective, how should the new curriculum be structured to provide pupils with the skills and dispositions needed in order to thrive in an increasingly diverse and multicultural environment?

- What challenges and opportunities does the proposed curriculum offer for the primary school sector?

The rest of this chapter places the analyses in the context of international perspectives on education about religions and ethical education (section 1.2). Section 1.3 describes Ireland in the context of social change. Section 1.4 provides an overview of the methodology used and approach to data collection, while section 1.5 describes the approaches adopted to data analysis. The final section (1.6) outlines the limitations of the study.

1.2 INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON EDUCATION ABOUT RELIGIONS AND ETHICAL EDUCATION

Different historical traditions, particularly around the extent of separation between Church and State, have resulted in very different systems across Europe: while some countries provide religious education as a compulsory part of the curriculum, in others this is optional or is not provided; yet others provide both religious education and ethics as an alternative (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 Approaches to Religious Education in State-supported Schools across EU Countries

Description	Countries
Compulsory	Austria, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden, UK.
Optional	Estonia, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Spain
Combination of approaches	Belgium, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Portugal
Ethics/ values as alternative	Belgium, Finland, Germany, Italy, Lithuania
Opt-out possible*	Belgium, Ireland, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, UK
Opt-in possible	Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania
No provision of RE	France, Slovenia

Note: * The law permits parents to opt their child out of any subject that is contrary to the conscience of the parent of the student or in the case of a student who has reached the age of 18 years, the student. RE=Religious education.
Source: Eurydice

In France, religious education as a subject is not provided; rather, the discussion of related matters is integrated into other subjects. Several countries provide a combination of approaches (see also Grayson et al., 2014). While education systems differ regarding the provision of religious education (RE), so do the approaches adopted in providing RE.[1] The distinction between learning from religion and learning about religion was initially made by Grimmitt (1987) and has been built upon by other theorists (see Avest et al., 2009). Learning *in* religion tends to focus on faith formation; learning *from* religion links it to the child's own experience; while learning *about* religion enables children to learn about the dominant religion in addition to other religions and belief systems (see Halsall and Roebben, 2010 for a discussion of different approaches to teacher professional development in this context; NCCA, 2015a).

How educational systems frame children's moral and religious development raises different issues for majority and minority faith groups, as well as those without religious affiliation (Tinker and Smart, 2012). In education systems where schools do not focus on religious formation but promote 'learning about religion', minority faith groups and the non-religious are less likely to face explicit tension over religious issues. Intrinsic to the goal of educating students about religions and beliefs are the instruments of civic and peace education, tolerance and ethics

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[1] It is beyond the scope of this report to provide detailed discussion of the content of these programmes across European countries. For further discussion, see Pepin, L. (2009).

education, as well as global and cross-cultural education. These approaches offer a different approach in advancing the understanding of 'living together' in multicultural societies.

In recent decades, many European countries have faced two countervailing trends: secularisation and a growth in the numbers affiliated to particular religious groups (Evans and Evans, 2008; Davie, 2006). This phenomenon is, in part, related to immigration, but also to people's changing attitudes towards organised religion (Casanova, 2004). Furthermore, emerging social tensions in some European countries have highlighted the need to place a policy focus on creating tolerant, mutually respectful societies where people are prepared to live together in increasingly diverse social settings.

Current debates have focused on two issues: the role of religious schools and the importance of promoting community values. The role of denominational schools in multicultural societies and the provision of religious education have increasingly become topics of controversy. What approach is most compatible with multicultural and diverse societies is increasingly debated across Europe and more widely. Research has also addressed the role of school *vis-à-vis* parents. Home is the primary sphere for the socialisation of children. Teaching children about religion, morals and values has traditionally taken place in the home as well as through formal religious institutions. In Ireland, education towards moral and spiritual development has taken place through the form of a patron's programme.[2] International research has referred to a strong association between parental beliefs and practices and those of their children. While some studies have emphasised the notion of the 'transmission' of beliefs from parents to children, it is important to note that children are active social actors who can develop their own opinions and attitudes about beliefs at a relatively young age (Smetana, 1981; Smyth et al., 2013).

There is a societal consensus that children should be provided with desirable dispositions and values but considerable debate about what that actually means and about which factors are strongest in shaping children's attitudes and habits. A warm, caring, and responsive parent–child relationship has been found to support the development of positive character traits, mutual understanding and tolerance (Berkowitz, 2000). Here, again, it is important to acknowledge the child's own agency in the process. This notion of children as active agents in the development of dispositions and attitudes has parallels in the emerging research and policy

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[2] Patrons play a notable role in the provision of religious education within the Irish education system since the establishment of the national (primary) school system. Each patron is given 2.5 hours per week to teach a programme that has been developed by them and that underpins the specific ethos of their schools. For further information, see NCCA (2015a).

literature on children's rights (see Clark, 2003). Some authors argue that changing patterns of family structures and child rearing, and a reduction in the amount of time families spend together as a family unit, have resulted in less time given by parents to discussions of moral and character development, which has a detrimental impact on children (Popenoe, 1998). However, other studies have shown an increase in the time, especially intensive 'quality' time, that parents spend with their children across many countries (Gauthier et al., 2004; Bianchi, 2000), thus suggesting the continued dominance of parents in children's moral socialisation.

The *Religion in Education: A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries* (REDCo) Project (Jackson, 2012) showed support among young people for education about religious diversity (for example, world religion classes). [3] This research demonstrates that studying religious and non-religious ethical/moral diversity is not erosive of students' own beliefs, but can help to develop a culture of 'living together'. While REDCo focused on the views of adolescents, the *Religious Education in Multicultural Societies* study (see Smyth et al., 2013) collected information from primary school children. It also showed that while a strong link exists between the views of parents and those of their children, children's views could differ from those of their parents and, even where they defined themselves as sharing their parents' beliefs, they adopted a personalised approach to such belief. This research, conducted in Irish primary schools, indicated the different approaches to religious and moral education (RME) in different types of schools, with children attending Catholic schools less likely to be taught about belief systems other than their own. [4] It showed that children tended to enjoy classes that focused on religious and/or moral education, regardless of the particular form it took, because they liked the content (especially the 'stories') and more interactive methodology used. However, in some schools, teachers still used a traditional 'chalk and talk' approach. The study showed that, although students in some schools were critical of the approach taken in RME, the vast majority would still take the subject even if they 'did not have to'. Other research in Europe and Ireland (Jackson, 2012; Darmody et al., 2014) shows that many young people want an opportunity to learn and talk about religion and belief in schools. They see the classroom as a potential 'safe space' for this to happen, and they appreciate skilful teachers who can both provide accurate information and manage discussions, which include significant differences in viewpoint, including secular humanism and other non-religious philosophies.

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[3] The project's main aim was to establish and compare the potentials and limitations of religion in the educational fields of selected European countries and regions. The project aimed to identify approaches and policies that can contribute to making religion in education a factor promoting dialogue in the context of European development. It drew on adolescents' attitudes to teaching about religious diversity across eight countries – England, Estonia, France, Germany, Norway, the Netherlands, Russia and Spain.

[4] The study involved sixth class children (aged 11–12 years).

1.3 IRELAND IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Recent years have seen a transformation of Ireland, which has gone from being a largely culturally and religiously homogenous society to one characterised by increasing diversity alongside a shift in religious beliefs and practice among the Irish-born population. This change has posed challenges for an educational system in Ireland organised primarily along denominational lines. While the State provides free primary education, each school is established by a patron body, which defines its ethos and appoints a board of management to run it on a day-to-day basis. The vast majority (96%) of primary schools in Ireland are owned by and operate under the patronage of religious denominations, approximately 90 per cent of which are owned and under the patronage of the Catholic Church. In 2011, the Minister for Education and Skills established an expert group to consult with stakeholders and to make recommendations on how primary schools can become more inclusive of different traditions, religions and beliefs. In June 2012, as part of his response to the recommendations of that report (see Coolahan et al., 2012), the Minister started a new process to look at the possible transfer of some schools run by the Catholic Church to other school patron bodies around the country. Following consultations with school communities, the patrons were asked to provide the Department of Education and Skills with a range of options for divestment. Since the Forum was established, decisions to change the patronage have been made but the process has been slow. Surveys of parents of preschool children were used to gauge the demand for different types of schools. The majority of the new schools established have a multidenominational ethos, reflecting parental demand.

The Advisory Group attached to the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector (Coolahan et al., 2012) recommended that the introduction to the primary curriculum should be revised to ensure that, while the general curriculum remains integrated, provision is made for denominational religious education/faith formation to be taught as a discrete subject. At present, parents have a legal right to opt their children out of religious education classes. According to the report by the Catholic Schools Partnership:

> *the manner in which such an opt-out is facilitated is related to available resources. According to the Irish Catholic Bishops' conference, schools are committed to facilitating parents in this regard, but they can only do so as resources are made available so that the school complies with its own policies on curriculum, supervision and child safeguarding.' (CSP, 2015, p. 17)[5]*

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[5] See Catholic Schools Partnership (2015).

However, existing research indicates that such a practice can contribute towards 'othering' – drawing attention to the differences between children (Smyth and Darmody, 2010). The Advisory Group was of the view that all children have the right to receive education in ERB and Ethics and the State has the responsibility to ensure that this is provided (Coolahan et al., 2012).

The Department of Education and Skills currently classifies primary schools as denominational, interdenominational and multidenominational, offering education through the medium of English or Irish. These categories can be defined as follows.

Denominational patronage: A school under the patronage of a single religious community. Such a school provides religious education according to the traditions, practices and beliefs of the specified religious community. It may also provide a wider education about religion and facilitate parents/guardians of other faith traditions to enable them to provide for religious education in their belief system.

Interdenominational patronage: A school under the patronage or trusteeship of more than one religious faith community. Such a school provides for a variety of religious education opportunities.

Multidenominational patronage: In the Irish context, two types of primary schools are categorised as multidenominational:

- Schools that do not provide religious education as formation during the school day, but do provide education about religions and beliefs, and where, if they so desire, parents/guardians can arrange for denominational religious education outside school hours in such schools;

- Schools that provide education about religions and also provide some faith formation for different denominations, depending on parental requests, during the school day, over a three or four week period.

In recent years, the non-Catholic population in Ireland has increased, due to growing numbers of people who report 'no religion', accompanied by an increase in the number of migrants with different belief systems (see Tables 1.2 and 1.3).

Irish Census figures from 2002 and 2011 show that while the number of people identifying themselves as Roman Catholic has grown, the proportion doing so has dropped from 88 to 85 per cent. There has also been a considerable increase of

those identifying with the 'no religion' category, from 3.5 per cent in 2002 to 5.7 per cent in 2011.

Table 1.2 Population by Religion (CSO, 2002)

	CSO 2002[6]	
	All Ages (Count)	All Ages (%)
Roman Catholic	3,462,606	88.0
Church of Ireland (including Protestant)	115,611	3.0
Other Christian religion	21,403	0.5
Presbyterian	20,582	0.5
Muslim (Islamic)	19,147	0.5
Orthodox (Greek, Coptic, Russian)	10,437	0.3
Methodist, Wesleyan	10,033	0.3
Other stated religions	40,026	1.0
No religion	138,264	3.5
Not stated	79,094	2.0

Note: Percentages are rounded.
Source: CSO interactive tables.

Table 1.3 Population by Religion (CSO, 2011)

	CSO 2011[7]	
	All Ages (count)	All Ages (%)
Roman Catholic	3,831,187	85.0
Church of Ireland, England, Anglican, Episcopalian	124,445	3.0
Muslim (Islamic)	48,130	1.0
Orthodox (Greek, Coptic, Russian)	44,003	1.0
Other Christian religion	39,652	1.0
Presbyterian	22,835	0.5
Apostolic or Pentecostal	13,876	0.3
Other stated religions	75,655	1.7
No religion	256,830	5.7
Not stated	68,668	1.5

Note: Percentages are rounded.
Source: CSO interactive tables.

At the same time, there has been an overall decrease in religiosity (attending services) among the population according to the European Values Study (Breen and Reynolds, 2011). [8] Patterns of belief among school-age children follow the general population trend and so have implications for the mix of beliefs among children in the primary sector. While parents can opt out of religious education, this may result in reinforcing their child's difference from their peers, which may

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[6] Total population in 2002: 3,917,336

[7] Total population in 2011: 4,588,252.

[8] The European Values Study is a pan-European project, which utilises an omnibus survey focusing especially on values associated with work, religion, lifestyles and other issues. Its most recent data-gathering exercise was in 2008, the fourth of its kind. This study focused on changing religious values in Ireland over the span of the EVS (1981–2008) and examines the rise in secularism and the rapid decrease in church participation, which bring Ireland much closer to European norms.

lead to parents 'accommodating' to the status quo to avoid highlighting such difference (Smyth and Darmody, 2011).

Previous research has recognised the role of the school as an important site for learning tolerance of diversity (Smyth et al., 2013). In particular, schools can help students develop positive perceptions of diversity by providing formal and informal experiences for interaction (Darmody and Smyth, 2015). Some curriculum areas, such as social, personal and health education (SPHE), provide an opportunity to discuss topics related to diversity, morals and values. Important insights about other cultures can be gained by engaging in various group activities such as sport (see Hertting and Karlefors, 2013, on the Swedish context). Educational policy has addressed the need to promote and support diversity by devising intercultural education guidelines embedded in equality and human rights. Promotion of a 'learning about religion' approach is evident in the intercultural education guidelines issued by the NCCA in 2006 (NCCA, 2006). The current structure of Irish primary schools, with its cathectical nature, potentially limits the capacity to actively promote intercultural education (Smyth and Darmody, 2011).

The mismatch between the increasingly diverse profile of the population and the dominance of Catholic schools, which emphasise faith formation, increases the potential for tensions between home and school over children's faith and character development as teachers and parents may not share the same culture or values (Darmody et al., 2014). Considering these trends, the issue of religion and belief identity is of growing political and educational importance, as is the question of various models of moral and ethical education.

Countries across Europe vary in the extent to which they support diversity and combat discrimination. According to a recent Eurobarometer survey (2015), discrimination is particularly prevalent in two areas: ethnic origin and religion or beliefs. [9] In Ireland, 58 per cent of the respondents felt that discrimination on the basis of ethnic origin is 'widespread'. This is somewhat lower than the EU28 average, at 64 per cent. Forty-one per cent of the Irish population believed that discrimination was also widespread in the area of religion or beliefs, again lower than the EU average of 50 per cent. Irish respondents agreed with statements about the need for the content of school lessons and materials to address diversity in the following areas: ethnic origin (88%); religion or beliefs (86%); sexual orientation (77%); and gender identity (75%). The corresponding figures for EU28 were: 81%; 80%; 67%; and 64% (ibid.).

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[9] See European Commission (2015).

1.4 METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The development of a new part of the primary school curriculum, ERB and Ethics, was initiated by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Consultation documents state:

> ERB is envisaged to help all children to learn about and to understand the major religions, belief systems and worldviews in today's society without seeking to promote the belief or practice of any one religion. (NCCA, 2015b)

Its aim is to promote a respect for different cultures, religions, and world views. The NCCA defines ethics education as education that aims to promote the dignity and freedom of all members of the society, emphasising the importance of human rights, social justice, rights and responsibilities.[10] The five strands or areas proposed for the curriculum in ERB and Ethics are: personal understanding; mutual understanding; spiritual awareness; character education; and connection with the wider world.

A broad consultation process was carried out by the NCCA.[11] This involved extensive information dissemination about the proposed curriculum, using various forms of social media, briefings and meetings with various interest groups (see Table 1.3). Background papers were also provided on the NCCA website. These background papers introduced the vision for the proposed curriculum and explained its position within the general primary school curriculum. As part of the consultation process, an online survey was carried out that sought the views of various stakeholders (teachers, educators, parents and general public) on the specific content of the proposal for the content of ERB and Ethics.[12] The questionnaires were designed by the NCCA, who then invited educators, parents and members of the general public to participate through the methods outlined in Table 1.3. The analysis provided in this report uses the data from the online surveys.[13]

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[10] For further information, see NCCA (undated).

[11] Some of the target audiences for the consultation included: teachers, schools, parents, children, educational partners, patrons, NCCA school networks, children's advocacy groups and other members of the general public. It also included various interest groups, including An Foras Pátrúnachta, Atheist Ireland, Catholic Primary School Managers Association (CPSMA), Children's Rights Alliance (CRA), Church of Ireland Board of Education (CIBE), An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaiochta (COGG), Community National Schools, Early Childhood Ireland, Educate Together, Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), Gaeilscoileanna Teo, Humanist Association of Ireland, Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO), Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN), Islamic Foundation of Ireland (IFI), National Parents Council Primary (NPCP), Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO), Primary Colleges of Education, Secular Schools Ireland Ltd., among others.

[12] Given the endorsement by the DES of the recommendations of the Forum's Report, the main purpose of the questionnaire was to engage respondents with the proposals for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics. Thus the questionnaire was not developed to gather data on *whether* a curriculum in these areas should or should not be developed for Irish primary schools.

Table 1.4 Consultation Process

Audience	Raising Awareness	Consultation Format
Teachers	- Postcards to schools - E-invitation to all schools - Twitter discussion (#EdChatie) - Facebook consultation page - InTouch magazine article - Consultation webpages - NCCA newsletter (info@ncca.ie) - Work with education partners	- Online questionnaire - Roundtable discussions - Classroom discussions between teachers - Written submissions
Parents	- Local newspaper press release - Local radio announcements - Popular websites - Work with National Parents Council - Twitter - Facebook consultation page	- Online questionnaire - Written submissions
Children	Through school networks	- Sample lessons with pupils - Pupil debates - Written feedback from pupils
Third level educators	- Postcards to 3rd level institutions - E-invitation to relevant departments - Twitter discussion (#EdChatie) - Facebook consultation page - Presentations at relevant conferences	- NCCA full consultation document circulated - Roundtable discussions - Written submissions - Online questionnaire - Focus groups
Other members of the general public	- Local newspaper press release - Local radio announcements	- NCCA full consultation document circulated - Consultation document aimed at parents circulated - Online questionnaire
Additional interest groups	- E-invitation - Local newspaper press release - Local radio interviews/announcements - Work with educational partners	- Full consultation document - Roundtable discussions and focus groups - Written submissions - Online questionnaire

Source: Personal communication from NCCA, 16 March 2016.

Invitations to participate in the online consultation survey were circulated to a wide range of organisations (see above) and advertised through media and other channels (see Table 1.3). In this consultation exercise, the online survey was only one format of consultation; in addition, the stakeholders could provide written submissions and/or attend one of the several information meetings organised by the NCCA (see above). [14] An increasing number of surveys are now being administrated via the internet due to the availability of technology and lower costs (Granello and Wheaton, 2004; Stewart, 2003). These surveys can have a number of advantages in yielding faster turnaround time; data received can be loaded directly to databases reducing both time and the risk of data-entry error (Umbach, 2004). Web-based surveys can be targeted at a representative sample of the

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[14] The remit of this study was to analyse only the data provided by the online survey (designed and piloted by the NCCA), not the other forms of data gathered as part of the consultation process.

population, for example, school principals, or can be 'volunteer surveys', where respondents participate in the survey on a voluntary basis.

Alongside poor representativeness, a poor response rate appears to be the major disadvantage associated with both volunteer and targeted web surveys (Granello and Wheaton, 2004). Another disadvantage is the potential for sample bias – access to the internet is not equally distributed throughout the population. There are also likely to be biases associated with differential (digital) literacy in the population and with the fact that the survey was only available in English and Irish. Although there have been a number of prominent volunteer surveys, including the Wage Indicator survey designed to measure graduate pay, they have faced particular difficulties regarding their lack of representativeness. Even using population characteristics to reweight the data, it has proven difficult to match the representativeness of traditional face-to-face surveys (Steinmetz et al., 2009, 2013).

Similarly, disadvantages also present themselves with the online survey discussed in this paper. This consultation process differs from traditional survey research in that respondents were not drawn from a nationally representative sample of the population. It is therefore not possible to estimate how many people were aware of the survey and, of this group, how many participated. Because participation was voluntary, those who completed the questionnaire were more likely to have held strong views on the subject.

Regardless of the nature of the sample, questionnaire design must adhere to specific principles. It is necessary to ensure that questions are unambiguous and that they measure all the appropriate attributes of the phenomenon being studied. Questionnaire piloting is seen as good practice, allowing the internal validity and reliability of the survey items to be assessed before administering the full survey. The questionnaires used in this consultation process were piloted among a very small number of teachers. Feedback was also provided by the Early Childhood and Primary Board before it went live. The feedback from both of these groups informed the final design.

Considering the nature of the current study, the participants in the survey cannot be assumed to be representative of the general population and cannot be generalised to the population. The findings presented in this study therefore need to be viewed in the context of the broader consultation process.

1.5   DATA AND APPROACHES TO DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis presented in this consultation paper is based on responses from 897 educators, 1,075 parents and 283 members of the general public (see Appendices 1–3 for the questionnaires used). The datasets were checked to avoid multiple responses from the same person by running frequency analysis on different items in the questionnaire (with duplicates removed). [15] The questionnaires were available both in English and Irish. Topics in the questionnaires addressed the following aspects of the proposed curriculum, ERB and Ethics:

- aims and strands;

- skills and dispositions developed by pupils;

- suitable methodologies and strategies for its delivery; and

- opportunities and challenges associated with its introduction.

In addition to structured questions about the background of the respondent, the survey for educators included several open-ended questions designed to glean a better insight into their perceptions regarding the content of the proposed curriculum. The survey for parents and the members of general public contained only one open-ended question.

As the first step, survey data were organised and re-coded in preparation for analysis. Responses to the open-ended questions were hand-coded into broad categories to enable easier comparisons between the groups of respondents. From this process it was clear that many respondents across the three groups of stakeholders raised issues that did not relate to the question asked. Hence the percentages given in Chapter 2 are only indicative of views given in response to each question, as the same issues could be raised across different questions. The next step involved descriptive analysis, documenting the particular responses given by educators, parents and the general public. This was followed by an analysis of variation across different types of schools (Catholic, minority faith, inter/multidenominational and other) in the case of educators.

The majority of the educators (teachers, principals, and others, n=897) were from the primary sector (72%); followed by the post-primary sector (10%); third level (9%); early childhood educators (2%) and others (7%), including student teachers.[16, 17] In total, 897 individuals responded to the teacher questionnaire. Of

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[15] The IP addresses were not used for checking duplicates as one computer could be used by several teachers in the school.

[16] This includes responses in Irish (n=3).

[17] The 'other' category also included cases that could not be coded due to insufficient information, e.g. 'interested party'.

the respondents, 52 per cent held a teaching position in a school and 29 per cent were school leaders (principals or deputy principals). The remaining 19 per cent were working in different educational settings. In terms of teaching experience, the biggest category, across various sectors, was of those with over 20 years of teaching experience (35%). When compared to the age profile of the population, older teachers (those with more years' experience) were found to be somewhat more likely to respond to the survey. The majority of the respondents were teaching in Catholic schools (60%), followed by multi/interdenominational schools (13%) and minority religion schools (5%).[18] Thus, when compared to the profile of primary schools, educators in non-Catholic schools were more likely to take part in the survey.

Just over 1,000 parents responded to the online survey (n=1,075).[19] While some of the parents had children attending a Catholic school (63%), minority religion (6%) or multi/interdenominational school (26%), there were others whose children were not yet school age or were attending a second-level school. These parents were categorised as 'other' (5%). This category also included cases that could not be coded (e.g. general comments that did not relate to the question). As with educators, the pattern indicates proportionately more responses from parents of children in non-Catholic than in Catholic schools.

1.6   LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There are limitations to this study, the foremost of which is the representativeness of the sample. A challenge of any survey research is finding and recruiting participants from the target population; in this case, educators, parents and members of the general public. The NCCA conducted the survey online to facilitate participation. However, this limited the possibilities for sending out reminders. In addition, the way in which the online questionnaire was set up enabled respondents to move from question to question without ensuring that all questions were answered. This resulted in many survey items (individual questions) having missing responses. For example, the question about appropriate aims was answered by under 600 educators out of 897 (36 per cent did not respond). The analysis provided here is based on valid responses (excluding missing cases). While the online survey had the potential to increase ease of response, some members of the target population may have not participated either because of its online format, or because they did not want to contribute to the study. In other words, the survey may be biased towards respondents who felt strongly about the proposed curriculum.

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[18] Examples of minority religion schools include Church of Ireland, Jewish, Presbyterian, Methodist. The small number of responses from teachers in special schools (n=11) was excluded from the analysis.
[19] The survey was not specifically targeted to parents whose children attended primary school.

Another limitation rises from the wording of the questions. Although the questionnaire was piloted among a small number of teachers (also taking into account comments from the Board for Early Childhood and Primary), some respondents (like individuals not working in schools) found some questions 'not applicable'.[20] In addition, in the questionnaire prepared by the NCCA, the question about aims combined several different competencies within one aim, making it impossible to gauge respondents' views regarding each competence. The questionnaires would also have benefitted from more detailed information being sought (such as gender of the parents, socio-economic background and level of education). Finally, attitudinal questions were strongly skewed towards positive answers, possibly leading to a response bias (for example, in the questionnaire for parents, 'My child's curiosity about different religions and beliefs should be encouraged throughout their education in primary school'). This aspect was criticised by some stakeholders who participated in the survey. Furthermore, while the information sessions held by the NCCA encouraged stakeholders to read online discussion papers about the proposed changes to the primary school curriculum and explained the vision for the new approach to teaching ERB and Ethics, it is impossible to tell how many of those participating in the survey engaged with this material.

Despite these limitations, the survey provided over 2,200 responses from educators, parents and the general public and provides useful information to feed into the consultation process about introducing ERB and Ethics as a part of the primary school curriculum.

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[20] For a list of members of the Board for Early Childhood and Primary, see:
http://www.ncca.ie/ga/Maidir_leis_an_CNCM/Boird-agus-Coist-an-CNCM/Board-for-Early-Childhood-and-Primary-January-2015.pdf.

Chapter 2

Results of the Study

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the analysis of data collected from educators, parents and the members of the general public through an online survey. The aim of the survey was to seek stakeholders' views on various aspects of the proposed curriculum, Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics. These included: aims for the curriculum; curriculum strands; skills and dispositions; methodologies and strategies; and opportunities and challenges. The teacher questionnaires relied heavily on open-ended questions in areas such as adding or excluding aims, strands, skills and dispositions. This chapter explores the extent to which the stakeholders supported various suggested aspects of the curriculum; and whether the views of educators varied by the school type they represented or years of experience. It also explores whether parental views varied by the type of school their child attended, or the class their child was in. It is worth noting at the outset that the response to open questions was relatively low in some cases; in addition, many stakeholders brought up various issues (such as the position of religion in state-funded schools; the necessity of the proposed curriculum change; issues regarding duplication) irrespective of the question asked. Hence it is impossible to provide a detailed breakdown of responses to the open questions – the same issue could have been addressed as part of an answer to a different question. The percentages given in this chapter that refer to open questions are indicative of minority/majority opinion within the question asked.

2.2 AIMS FOR THE CURRICULUM IN ERB AND ETHICS

2.2.1 Views of Educators

The questionnaire aimed at educators asked the respondents to indicate to what degree they agreed or disagreed with the following six proposed aims.

1. ERB and Ethics should enable children to develop self-awareness, confidence, personal beliefs and positive social identities.
2. ERB and Ethics should enable children to have a knowledge and understanding of how religions and belief traditions have contributed to the culture in which we live.
3. ERB and Ethics should enable children to express comfort, empathy and joy with human diversity.
4. ERB and Ethics should enable children to form deep, caring human connections.
5. ERB and Ethics should enable children to understand the relationship between rights and responsibilities.

6. ERB and Ethics should enable children to appreciate the impact of prejudice and discrimination.[21]

As shown in Figure 2.1, an overall majority of educators agreed with the proposed aims of the curriculum: 86% strongly agreed or agreed with statements about human diversity, rights and responsibilities, and the impact of prejudice and discrimination. Eighty-five per cent agreed with the statement about developing self-awareness and other qualities, 84 per cent with forming human connections and 82 per cent with the contributions of religions and belief traditions to culture.[22]

There were some significant differences between the views of respondents from different types of schools (see Table 2.1). Those from inter/multidenominational schools were more likely than others to strongly agree or agree with the following aims: ERB and Ethics should enable children to develop self-awareness, confidence, personal beliefs and positive social identities (95%); ERB and Ethics should enable children to express comfort, empathy and joy with human diversity (96%); and ERB and Ethics should enable children to appreciate the impact of prejudice and discrimination (93%).

Figure 2.1 Proportion of Educators Strongly Agreeing or Agreeing with Proposed Aims
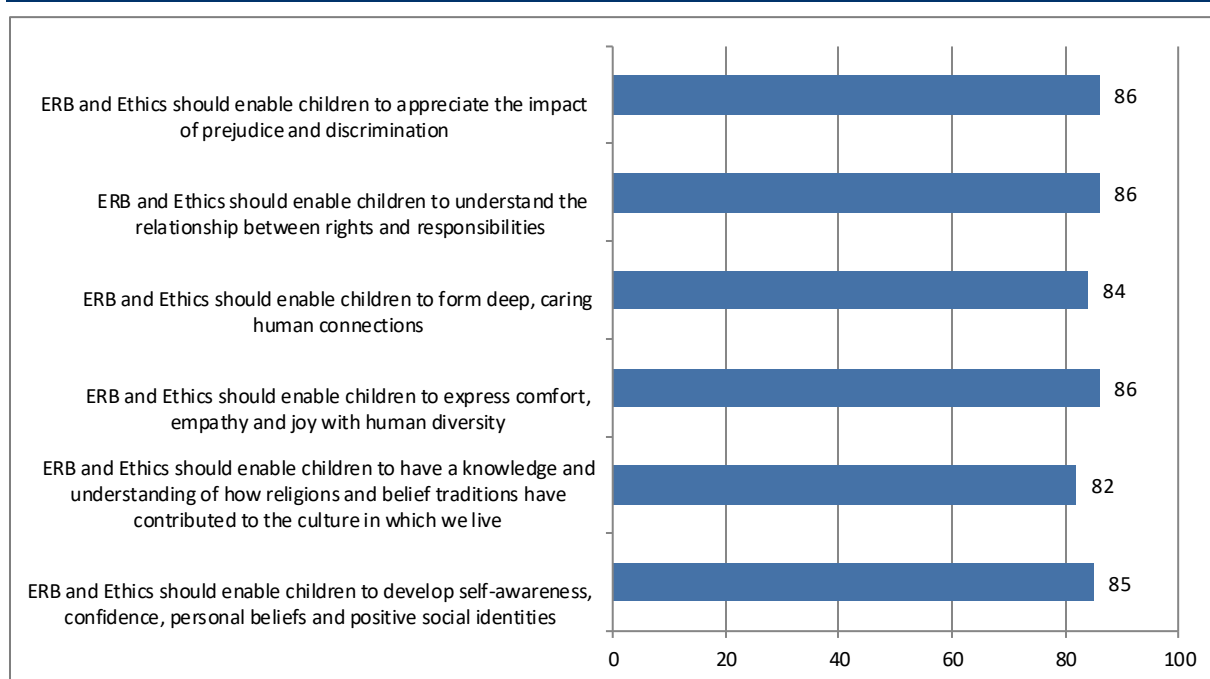
Source: NCCA data 2016 (n=897).

The respondents from Catholic schools (85%) were most likely to agree that the proposed curriculum should enable children to express comfort, empathy and joy

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[21] These aims were designed by the NCCA and used in the questionnaires.
[22] The analysis is based on just under 600 valid responses (out of 897).

with human diversity and that it should enable children to appreciate the impact of prejudice and discrimination. The educators in minority religion schools (78%) were most likely to agree that the aims suitable for the curriculum should enable children to understand the relationship between rights and responsibilities and celebrate human diversity (see Table 2.1). There were no significant differences in respondents' views by years of experience (see Table 2.2).

Table 2.1   Proportion of Educators Strongly Agreeing or Agreeing with Proposed Aims, by Type of Institution

	Catholic (n=538)	Minority religion (n=48)	Inter/multi denominational (n=114)	Other (n=197)	Sig.
ERB and Ethics should enable children to appreciate the impact of prejudice and discrimination.	85	73	93	90	p<.002
ERB and Ethics should enable children to understand the relationship between rights and responsibilities.	84	78	97	88	ns
ERB and Ethics should enable children to form deep, caring human connections.	82	70	97	86	ns
ERB and Ethics should enable children to express comfort, empathy and joy with human diversity.	85	78	96	88	p<.000
ERB and Ethics should enable children to have a knowledge and understanding of how religions and belief traditions have contributed to the culture in which we live.	80	70	93	84	ns
ERB and Ethics should enable children to develop self-awareness, confidence, personal beliefs and positive social identities.	84	71	95	88	p<.001

Source: NCCA data, 2016.

Table 2.2 Proportion of Educators Strongly Agreeing or Agreeing with Proposed Aims, by Years of Experience

	0–5 years (n=101)	6–10 years (n=153)	11–15 years (n=161)	16–20 years (n=75)	21+ years (n=263)	Sig.
ERB and Ethics should enable children to appreciate the impact of prejudice and discrimination.	89	93	84	75	86	ns
ERB and Ethics should enable children to understand the relationship between rights and responsibilities.	87	93	82	73	87	ns
ERB and Ethics should enable children to form deep, caring human connections.	87	90	80	69	85	ns
ERB and Ethics should enable children to express comfort, empathy and joy with human diversity.	92	93	83	79	85	ns
ERB and Ethics should enable children to have a knowledge and understanding of how religions and belief traditions have contributed to the culture in which we live.	85	84	78	74	85	ns
ERB and Ethics should enable children to develop self-awareness, confidence, personal beliefs and positive social identities.	85	91	83	73	86	ns

Source: NCCA data, 2016.

In an open question, the educators were asked *whether there were other aims that they would like to see addressed in the curriculum*. Only a relatively small number of respondents (19 per cent; n=174) contributed to this question. Over one-quarter felt that no additional aims should be added or felt unsure about doing so. About 10 per cent would have liked to add character development and moral values – features of the proposed strands of the new parts of the curriculum – with nine per cent suggesting that diversity should be added as an aim. Other areas to be considered for the new curriculum included: shared values; character development; knowledge of different faiths and beliefs (and about people who have none); development of certain personality traits and skills; human interaction and relationships; addressing discrimination and exclusion; and promotion of diversity, among others. All of these areas were considered important for the development of a moral person, as noted by one of the respondents.

> *As part of the Ethics programme, there should be a focus on the shared values, principles and virtues of character that people of all religions (and none) consider fundamental to being a moral person. Having read the consultation document I believe there is room for a greater focus on moral character development from the perspective of virtue, i.e. helping children to reflect upon the specific character traits of moral persons and foster these traits in themselves. This goes beyond the focus on citizenship which comes across quite strongly in the consultation paper.* (Educator)

Another noted:

> *ERB and Ethics should support children in understanding that our beliefs and ethical priorities may change over a lifetime. ERB should provide opportunities for children to reflect on how their families, culture and traditions have influenced the formation of their beliefs. Children, when at an age-appropriate level, should learn to distinguish between beliefs and truths.* (Educator)

A small number of respondents felt that the proposed curriculum has the potential to act as a useful framework in primary schools, assisting children in acquiring the skills needed to live in a multicultural society.

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

A few respondents suggested that there is a need to differentiate between different components of the curriculum. For example, it was suggested that philosophy should be included as a module within the ERB and Ethics curriculum. One respondent suggested that education on religions and beliefs should be treated separately to education on ethics, considering their different aims and nature.

> *I also see the benefits of implementing a philosophy module/ programme to run as a complementary component to the ERB and Ethics.* (Educator)

> *It would probably be most ideal to take the opportunity to introduce ERB and Ethics as separate subjects within the curriculum. Religion/belief is not the same as Ethics and the aims are really quite different although like many curriculum areas taken together they deepen the child's awareness of herself and the world of thought and cultural practice.* (Educator)

> *ERB should be taught by the Church and family in their own time and not by teachers in schools. Ethics and Philosophy should be taught in schools. ERB and Ethics should explain that no religion is right and no religion is wrong, similar to Art.* (Educator)

About six per cent of the respondents felt that many of the suggested aims are already addressed in primary schools.

ERB and Ethics should enable children to develop self-awareness, confidence, personal beliefs and positive social identities. I feel as though this is already covered through SPHE and our Multi-Belief Programme, Goodness Me Goodness You. (Educator, multi/interdenominational school)

Furthermore, stakeholder responses indicated some confusion regarding the meaning of ethics. The NCCA (2015) consultation document considers the teaching of ethics to include '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' (p.6), but does not define the concept.

The respondents' views diverged about the inclusion of religion in the new curriculum, with educators from multi/interdenominational (and some Catholic) schools arguing for a broader approach to teaching about religions; in other words, they promoted teaching about different belief systems and religions. Some educators from denominational schools felt that the proposed curriculum offers too little in the form of specific religious ethos as an aim.

While the introduction of the ERB consultation paper acknowledges that as part of 'patrons' programmes in religious and ethical education, children learn how beliefs shape actions' there is no explicit mention in this survey as to what the implication would be for Roman Catholic schools in terms of time allocation or what percentage of the new curriculum will focus on the Catholic faith. I feel that throughout the ERB paper there is a proper a lack of focus on the Catholic faith. (Educator, Catholic school)

Overall a number of suggestions were made, with only about 20 respondents not recommending any additional aims to be added. The educators seemed supportive of aims relating to children's rights, unbiased information about different belief systems, developing critical thought and reflection of universal human values, among others.

Two equally strong opinions could be distinguished. One group supported the proposed changes.

I think that if all the above were covered it would provide the next generation with a sense of values that would contribute to a better Ireland. (Educator, multidenominational school)

I think that if all the above was achieved this would be a brilliant course. (Educator, Catholic school)

Another group felt that either the current curriculum covers most of the material; or were against the secular nature of the programme.

> *I think this is an unnecessary subject. This programme should be incorporated as part of SPHE. Religious Education should follow the programme of the patron in each school and this programme should in no way be compromised. (Educator, Catholic* school*)*

In fact, the inclusion of religious education and sacraments in state-funded schools emerged as an issue in a number of cases, irrespective of the focus of the survey question, indicating that many stakeholders have very strong views on this topic. While some were critical about the inclusion of religious education in schools, others were supportive of it.

Educators were also asked to indicate in an open question *whether any of the proposed aims should not be included in the curriculum*. Again, only a small number responded to the question (13%, n=120). Over half felt that nothing should be excluded. Other responses fell into two broad categories: areas already covered by the existing primary school curriculum (about 13%) and the position of religious education in schools (7%). A sizable number of responses critiqued the programme; a discussion of these comments is provided at the end of this chapter. Just under one-quarter of the respondents felt that existing subjects, such as religious education and SPHE, already cover areas like self-awareness, human connections, and rights and responsibilities. Furthermore, some felt that religious education, self-awareness and human connections (elements of the 1999 Primary School Curriculum) are better addressed by parents rather than the school.

> *Aims 1 (self-awareness), 4 (human connections) and 5 (rights and responsibilities). These are already covered in RE and in the SPHE curriculum. Faith-based schools should not have to teach this as well. The new Catholic curriculum Grow in Love includes respecting and learning about other faiths.* (Educator, Catholic school)

> *Aim number 1 (self-awareness) and 4 (human connections) above are treading on parents' territory.* (Educator, minority faith school)

> *I'm unsure of the personal belief element in aim 1, how it can be done within a school setting? I would prefer an informing curriculum.* (Educator, Catholic school)

Under one-quarter felt strongly about maintaining the position of religious formation in schools.

> *At primary school level, children receive the faith formation that will be of great benefit to many of them throughout their lives. It is very*

important that 'a world religions programme' should not disturb the foundations before they are set. This explains my answers regarding diversity and prejudice above. (Educator, Catholic school)

In addition, under one-quarter proposed the removal of faith formation and the promotion of one particular religion in schools.

Eliminate anything that relates to faith formation or promotion of one faith over another or promotes any faith at all. Faith formation should be outside of school and delivered in the home (if the parents so choose) or in Church schools if the student wants to attend and / or their parent wants to send them. (Educator, multidenominational school)

My school accepts children of all faiths who live in the parish, which means that all the children can attend their local school. However, it also means that any religion taught in my classroom is possibly offensive to the non-Catholic students. I think all schools should be reverted to State ownership – they are funded by taxpayer's money – and obliged to admit all local children irrespective of belief and to teach an ERB and Ethics programme instead of religion. The responsibility for faith formation should be given back to the Church and parents. (Educator, Catholic school)

The responses indicate strong views among the stakeholders regarding the position of religious education in schools; opinions seemed to be divided more or less in equal proportions. Advocating the removal of faith formation from schools was more evident in the responses from educators in the multi/interdenominational sector. However, a small number of educators in denominational schools also felt the same way, suggesting that sacramental preparation should not take place during the school day. There was no variation in the nature of responses by years of experience. In sum, while there were some differences in the responses regarding the aims of the curriculum between sectors; the views were equally diverse within school sectors, particularly in Catholic schools, over the position of religious education and school ethos. While some educators in Catholic schools were very supportive of the proposed curriculum, others considered it unnecessary or even counter to the Catholic ethos in their schools.

2.2.2 Views of Parents

The topic of aims (with each aim addressing several skillsets, as set out by the questionnaire) was articulated in a different format in the survey of parents than it was in the survey of educators. Parents (n=1,075) were asked to indicate the

extent to which they agreed with the following range of statements about the knowledge and attitudes they would like their child to acquire in primary school.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Members of the general public were also asked about the extent to which they agreed with the aims of the proposed curriculum. This questionnaire listed the following items.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Figure 2.2 below shows that 94 per cent of all parents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, 'I would like my child to recognise unfairness, injustice and the impact of discrimination'. They were also supportive of statements such as, 'I would like my child to understand the relationship between rights and responsibilities' (73%); 'I would like my child to develop self-awareness, confidence, their personal beliefs and positive identities' (73%); 'I would like my child to understand more about themselves and how they relate to others' (73%); 'The classroom should be a place where my child's beliefs and values are respected' (72%); 'I would like my child to express empathy and joy with human diversity and from deep, caring human connections' (71%); 'My child should be comfortable sharing his/her ideas about religions and beliefs in a respectful school environment' (70%); It is important for my child to form positive relationships with children of different cultural, religious and non-religious backgrounds' (69%); and 'My child's curiosity about different religions and beliefs should be encouraged throughout their education in primary school' (59%). Overall, the parents participating in this survey were more supportive of aims and ideas relating to social justice and personal development than aspects such as 'curiosity about religions' and 'contribution of religions'.

There were some differences in parental views regarding the perceived appropriateness of suggested aims and ideas by the type of school their children were attending (see Table 2.3), only three of which were statistically significant: empathy and joy with human diversity; forming positive relationships with children from different cultural backgrounds; and encouraging curiosity about different religions and beliefs. Parents whose children were attending multi/interdenominational schools were more likely than others to strongly agree or agree with the statements: 'I would like my child to express empathy and joy with human diversity and form deep, caring human connections'; 'It is important for my child to form positive relationships with children of different backgrounds' and; 'My child's curiosity about different religions and beliefs should be

encouraged throughout their education in primary school'. The respondents' views about the appropriate aims for the curriculum did not vary by the year group their children were in.

The respondents from the general public agreed with the majority of the items included in the questionnaire. They were somewhat less likely to support the following statements, but even so, a majority did support them: 'Children should have knowledge and understanding of how religions and beliefs have contributed to the culture in which we live' (82%); and 'Children's curiosity about different religions and beliefs should be encouraged throughout their education in primary school' (73%).

Figure 2.2 Proportion of Parents and General Public Respondents Strongly Agreeing or Agreeing with Proposed Aims and Ideas for a Curriculum in ERB and Ethics
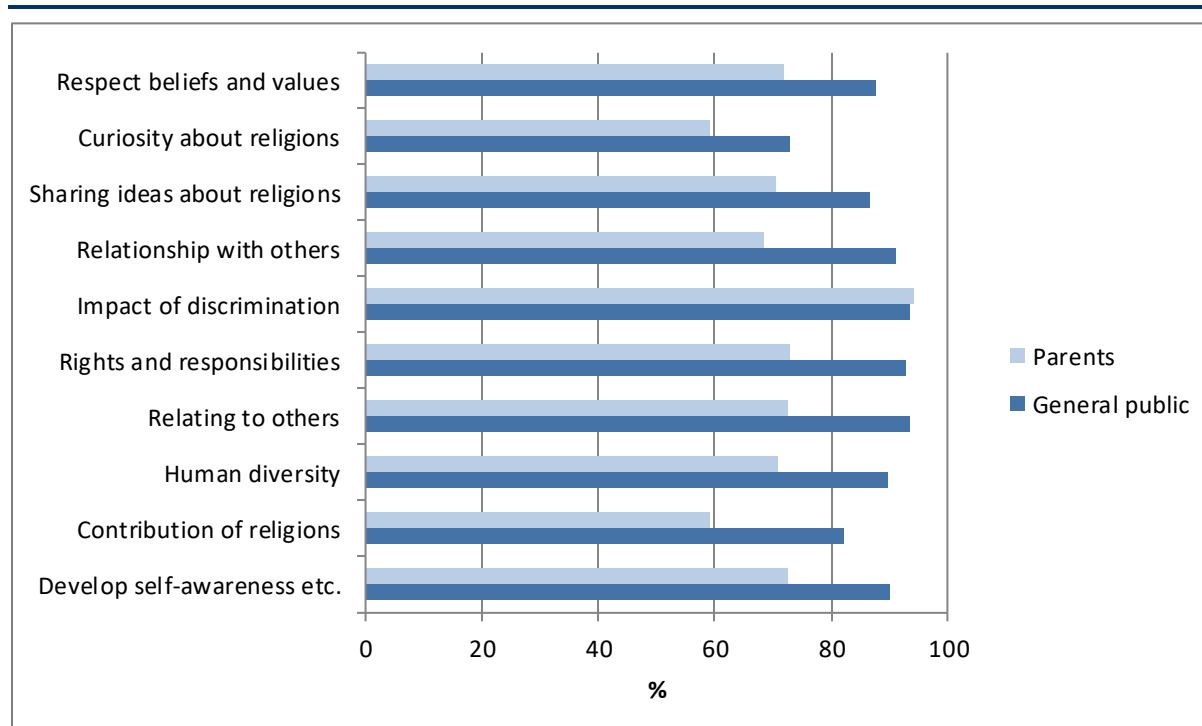
Source: NCCA data 2016 (P=1075; GP=283).

Table 2.3 Proportion of Parents Strongly Agreeing or Agreeing with Proposed Aims and Ideas for a Curriculum in ERB and Ethics

	Catholic	Minority religion	Inter/multi denominational	Other	Sig.
Develop self-awareness etc.	70.5	77.4	79.1	69.6	Ns
Contribution of religions	56.5	66.1	66.4	57.1	Ns
Human diversity	68.6	72.6	79.1	66.1	p<.10
Relating to others	70.2	80.6	79.4	67.9	Ns
Rights and responsibilities	71.7	79.0	78.0	67.9	Ns
Impact of discrimination	92.7	96.1	98.2	90.5	Ns
Relationship with others	64.7	75.8	78.3	64.3	p<.000
Sharing ideas about religions	67.5	77.4	77.3	71.4	ns
Curiosity about religions	56.2	61.3	68.2	57.1	p<.007
Respect beliefs and values	70.0	75.8	76.5	71.4	ns

Note: *I–MD= Inter/multidenominational.*
Source: NCCA data 2016 (n=1075).

Parents were only asked one open question, about the way in which the proposed curriculum could contribute to the lives of children. This explains the relatively limited verbatim reporting of parents' views. The responses from parents (58%, n=626 answered this open question) indicated that they would like their child to learn about equality, diversity and tolerance (about 20%).[23]

> *A curriculum that is not tied to any particular faith would help to reduce intolerance and ignorance. I would like my child to be aware and respectful of other beliefs. Such a curriculum should also pervade approaches to informal learning within the school.* (Parent)

> *Broaden their understanding of the role of ethics and our obligations to other human beings regardless of race or creed. Develop their sense of social justice, fairness and equality. Grow their tolerance and openness to the beliefs and ways of life of other cultures.* (Parent)

> *I would like the curriculum to explore with my child, the reasons … behind such diversity in traditions, values and religions, how belief systems can be quite similar and how some are so different. Why some believe in God and others do not. Creationism versus Evolution – are these two compatible or completely opposite theories? Should absolutely everything in life be tolerated, or should some things not be? Sound moral values in general and how to show compassion for others while not compromising your own beliefs.* (Parent)

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[23] Here and elsewhere in the report, the percentages referring to responses to the open questions indicate responses of those who responded to the open question. It is important to note that not explicitly stating something in response to an open-ended question does not imply that parents do not hold a particular view.

Parents also wanted their children to learn about social norms and morals (about 13%).

> *Help them to develop their moral character. Knowing about religion, knowing about right and wrong is just not the same as learning how to be a good person, a good citizen. Children need a dedicated space to develop a moral self.* (Parent)

> *I would like ERBE* [ERB and Ethics] *to contribute to teaching my children respect for others, themselves and to recognise [the difference] between what is right and wrong in terms of their personal behaviour and accountability. I see teaching ERBE as complementary to what myself and my wife teach our kids at home with regard to respect for themselves and others, and to always try their best to do right by themselves and others.* (Parent)

About an equal number of parents (approximately one-quarter) wanted their children to learn about different beliefs and critical thinking.

> *I want them to know there are a range of religions with lots of different beliefs and it's ok to follow any or none if that's what they chose.* (Parent)

> *I would like it to provide her with an understanding of all of the religions and beliefs that make up modern society so that she can make informed decisions and arguments as needed during her school life.* (Parent)

> *I would like them to learn what morality is, and what it means to live ethically – for this critical thinking would have to be developed and encouraged. I would consider that to be of utmost importance.* (Parent)

> *I would like her to learn the critical thinking skills to evaluate these different beliefs so that she can make an informed decision about what spiritual path is most helpful to her.* (Parent)

About 11 per cent of parents recommended avoiding the promotion of a particular religious perspective.

> *I would like the ERB and Ethics to replace faith formation and religious instruction. My son is from a non-religious background and has been segregated and discriminated against in school on the basis of this. We could not get him into an Educate Together school as they were oversubscribed. There should be no place for religious indoctrination in the classroom.* (Parent)

I would like the ERB curriculum to be fair to my child in a way that the current RE /religious classes situation is not. I was not comfortable sending my child to a local (religious) school because it was clear their RE class and its integration in the entire curriculum did not promote any respect for my child's and our beliefs. I hope the introduction of the ERB will change that situation and promote respect for all. (Parent)

This view was expressed mostly by parents whose children attended non-denominational schools. Some commented on a lack of alternative options available, with most multidenominational schools being oversubscribed. About 20 per cent of the respondents felt that no changes are necessary, as many Catholic schools already cover most of the areas proposed in the new curriculum. The views diverged within as well as between school types. While some parents whose children attended Catholic schools wanted the sole focus on Catholicism to be replaced by learning about different faith systems ('A curriculum in ERB and Ethics should contribute to the life of my child by ensuring that the single focus on Catholic formation is removed'), others had specifically chosen Catholic schools as they expected their children to receive faith formation.

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

About 13 per cent of those responding to the open-ended item argued for keeping religious education in primary schools. However, the views within this group varied, with some wanting religion covered in a comparative context, while others wanted to keep the status quo.

I would like the ERBE [ERB and Ethics] *to be taught in the overall context of my child's school's Christian/Catholic ethos. The Christian ethos of my children's school is important to us as a family and I see no reason why the ERBE cannot be taught in the light of such [an] ethos. Indeed, from reading the consultation document it would [seem] that most of the curriculum is already is covered in the Alive-O programme. As a Christian family who tr[ies] to live our lives by Christ's teaching and raise our children by the same values, I feel it would be fundamentally important that ethics would be taught from a Christian viewpoint. I would have concerns about adding yet another strand to an already full curriculum and overlap with what is already taught as part of the patron's programme.* (Parent)

> *More emphasis on the Catholic faith. Children are not being taught enough about their own faith.* (Parent)

About five per cent of the parents noted that areas such as religious and moral development are the responsibility of parents.

> *Religion and ethics can be discussed at home.* (Parent)

> *I was horrified when he arrived home from school to announce, 'I believe that Jesus is the son of God'. His spiritual education is the sole responsibility of his father and I. Should we choose not to expose him to a faith community, the state should not step in to fill that intentional void.* (Parent)

> *Ethics should be taught/reinforced in school; however, any bible studies/prayers/worship should be fostered in homes only.* (Parent)

Parents' views did not vary by the class their children attended (junior infants; senior infants; 1st-6th class); however, a small number of parents noted that teaching of the new curriculum should be done in an age-appropriate way, and that comparative religion is best kept for second-level schools so as not to confuse young children.

One parent noted that tolerance and understanding needs to be practiced within a wider community and adults holding particular beliefs should be more understanding of others holding different belief systems or none.

> *I am upset that my seven year old daughter was told yesterday by a Catholic neighbour she will be going to hell for not making her Communion. As a country we need to start implementing* respect for each other which begins within education. (Parent)

Responses from the general public (69 per cent; n=195 of those participating in the survey responded to this question) indicated that the proposed curriculum was seen to have the potential to contribute in the following areas: basic understanding of religious diversity (over one-quarter), respect and tolerance, and critical thinking (all over one-quarter), among others.

> *Children should be taught about all major religions, develop critical thinking skills and the ability to question. This approach will nurture non-discriminatory values, establish lifelong curiosity and the ability to connect with the world regardless of religion.* (Member of the general public)

Views diverged regarding the position of religious education in primary schools. About half of the members of the public felt that schools should provide children with a broad knowledge of different religions and belief systems, and that faith formation should not be part of the school day, or if so, only as an extra-curricular subject.

> *All religions should be taught in an RE class. Catholic classes need to be stopped at school. Communion, etc., should be done in the pupils' own time. Baptism certs [certificates] should not be a requirement to enter primary school – this discrimination needs to stop.* (Member of the general public)

> *It is my desire that parents who wish for their child to participate in a particular religious education and related rites/sacraments, should be offered this as an extra-curricular subject, rather than as an integral part of the school curriculum.* (Member of the general public)

About one-quarter felt that the proposed curriculum provides challenges for denominational schools and that it is necessary to provide 'non-religious schooling alternatives to families who require them'.

> *In schools with a religious patron, they should be allowed to teach the beliefs of the patron of the school.* (Member of the general public)

> *I do not want time for teaching children their Catholic faith in Catholic primary schools to be diluted or shortened. The 'ethics' which will be taught ... this new programme may well not be compatible with Catholic teaching. I do not want secular thinking to be part of the curriculum in Catholic schools. If parents want this programme, let them choose a non-Catholic school.* (Member of the general public)

A few suggestions concerned the position of ethics in the new curriculum. Two respondents felt that a distinction should be made between teaching ethics and other subject areas.

> *Ethics and morality are separate issues from religiosity. A module on philosophy and critical thinking is more important than education in religion and beliefs.* (Member of the general public)

> *Ethics in a republic should be entirely separated from anything to do with religious beliefs.* (Member of the general public)

Elsewhere, the following comments were made.

> *Education about Religion and Beliefs and Ethics should not be a separate subject in primary school – in the same way that Leadership*

should not be a separate subject. It should be learned and developed through other subjects. (Member of the general public)

Faith formation needs to be removed from schools. An ethics course should replace it. The basics of philosophy should be taught from an early age to encourage critical thinking and personal understanding. (Member of the general public)

While over one-quarter of the respondents questioned the necessity of providing a new curriculum, noting that many areas were already covered by different subject areas, there were others who felt that the new curriculum has the potential to make a positive contribution to the lives of children in terms of raising awareness of different issues.

I am delighted to see that this is being considered. These are so fundamental to growing up and being in the world. If this change means more self-awareness, interpersonal awareness, a sense of responsibility to make the world a better place for oneself and others, then I am 100% in favour and think this will contribute strongly to lessen bullying and self-esteem issues. (Member of the general public)

2.3   CURRICULUM STRANDS

The five strands or areas proposed for the curriculum in ERB and Ethics are: personal understanding; mutual understanding; spiritual awareness; character education; and connection with the wider world (NCCA, 2015b). Educators were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that these are appropriate strands for inclusion in this curriculum. Overall, they felt that these proposed strands are appropriate for inclusion in the curriculum, as indicated in Figure 2.3. However, they were less likely to strongly agree or agree (65%) with the appropriateness of 'spiritual awareness' as a strand.

Figure 2.3 Proportion of Educators Strongly Agreeing or Agreeing with Proposed Strands for Inclusion in a Curriculum for ERB and Ethics
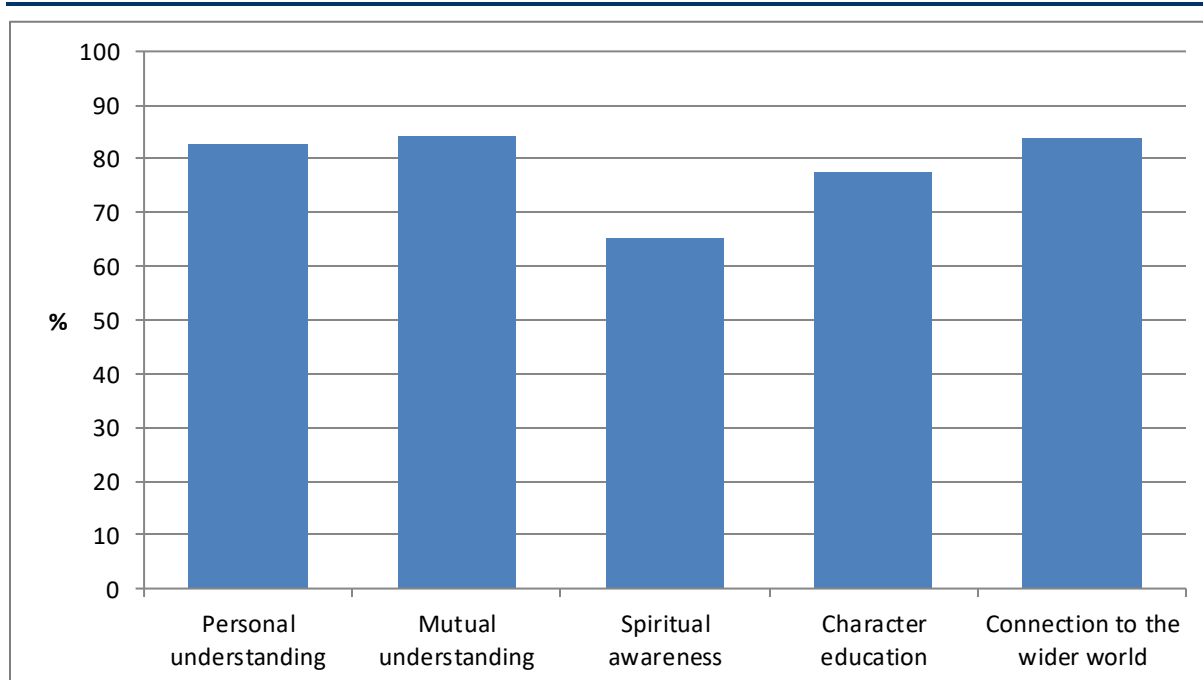
Source: NCCA data 2016 (n=897).

Table 2.4 presents educators' responses by school type. Although there was some variation in the responses, differences in responses were only statistically significant regarding one strand: mutual understanding. Educators working in inter/multidenominational schools were somewhat more likely to strongly agree or agree with having 'mutual understanding' as a strand in the proposed curriculum. The educators' views regarding appropriate strands did not vary by years of experience.

Table 2.4 Proportion of Educators Strongly Agreeing or Agreeing with Proposed Strands for Inclusion in a Curriculum for ERB and Ethics

	Catholic (n=538)	Minority religion (n=48)	Inter/ Multidenomi national (n=114)	Other (197)	sig
Personal understanding	81	78	93	86	ns
Mutual understanding	80	82	98	90	p<.004
Spiritual awareness	64	70	78	61	ns
Character education	75	70	91	81	ns
Connection to the wider world	82	85	89	87	ns

Note: I–MD = Inter/multidenominational.
Source: NCCA data 2016.

As the next step, respondents were asked if there were other strands that should be considered. Fourteen per cent of educators (n=124) responded to this question. Overall, a number of strands or topics were suggested, including tolerance of

faith/other religions; acceptance of diversity; rights and equality; philosophy; spirituality; mindfulness; respect; empathy; conflict resolution; and personal skills, including critical thinking, values, oral skills and development of own faith. Educators' views diverged regarding the inclusion of religious education. Just over one-quarter indicated that no further strands need to be added and about nine per cent thought that the strands are already covered by the existing curriculum. Fourteen per cent thought that the strands should include humanism, spirituality and philosophy. About 12 per cent supported the idea of including learning about religions as part of the curriculum. One respondent highlighted the need to inform children about different religions to combat misconceptions about minority religions.

> *Although it is mentioned in the 'possible themes' section, I think that learning about other religions and belief systems should be included as an objective of the curriculum. Allow me to use my own personal demographic for a moment: I am a young person who spends quite a lot of time online. This means that I regularly see people who insist on using false claims to back up their own prejudices (particularly on social media). Given the current global climate, this means I personally see people my own age, who are very poorly informed, making brash claims about certain faiths – particularly Islam. They then back their claims up with information that is, quite simply, inaccurate. I feel that it is absolutely imperative that we teach children the facts so that they can become informed, rational people. This means that it needs to be specifically mentioned as an objective of the curriculum that children will be taught facts about the major world religions.* (Educator)

Some representatives of denominational schools felt that these schools should be able to continue teaching religion in accordance with the ethos of their schools: 'Schools with a religious ethos, Catholic, Protestant, Muslim or Jewish, should be allowed to teach their own religion' (Educator).

Eleven per cent recommended adding values and morals. Other suggestions by a smaller number of respondents included: diversity; own faith development; rights, equality, justice; conflict resolution; and respect and empathy.

In addition, the respondents were asked *whether any of the stated strands should not be considered*. Thirteen per cent of survey participants contributed to this question (n=119). Just under one half of these respondents thought that none of the existing strands should be excluded, with 12 per cent believing that many of these areas are already covered by the existing curriculum. As before, educators' opinions differed on the provision of religious education. In addition, about 15 per

cent felt that spiritual awareness and formation should remain the responsibility of the home rather than the school.

> *I have problems and am unsure how spiritual awareness/ developing personal beliefs can be successfully introduced in an ERB style curriculum because of the diversity in beliefs from Christianity (and within the differing denominations), Islam, Atheists, Agnostics, Hindus, Humanists, Judaism, Jehovah's witnesses etc. etc. without either watering down people's beliefs OR insulting them.* (Educator)

> *Care needs to be taken with the notion that we all have 'spiritual awareness'. This is not an uncontroversial, universally accepted idea so it would not be right to give children the understanding that they must develop a 'spirituality'. This may be straying too far into the domain of denominational religious instruction where faith formation is the goal. The goals of this new programme should be very clear to all concerned and should not cross over into matters of religious faith. Surely the aim here is to learn FROM religions rather than learning HOW to be religious?* (Educator)

About two per cent felt unsure about the nature of proposed 'character education' and argued that this and associated areas were already covered by the current curriculum.

> *Character education* [should not be considered] *because what is it based on? Who is going to do it?* (Educator)

> *Character education, personal and mutual understanding are already covered through SPHE and religious programme, and the primary responsibility for these lie with parents.* (Educator)

It was also felt by a minority of respondents that areas such as 'connection to the wider world' and 'mutual understanding' were too ambiguous and as such could be open to different interpretations.

> *Connection to the 'wider world' and 'mutual understanding'* [should not be considered]. *Not because I think these things are in themselves bad but that they are ambiguous and in my mind could be easily interpreted as an attempt to say that all religions are basically equal and nothing more than cultural phenomena or pastimes. I mean a key message of the ERB is 'Teaching Ethics through a faith lens is not a recommended approach for a national curriculum in Ethics'. I strongly disagree with this approach.* (Educator)

The educators also noted that primary education is only a first step in educating young children and that the curriculum should not be too ambitious, especially in

the context of the 'overcrowding' of the curriculum. One respondent argued that, while the proposed strands are appropriate for inclusion in the curriculum, care should be taken in covering a multitude of issues in an age-appropriate way.

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

2.4   SKILLS AND DISPOSITIONS

The survey provided a list of skills and dispositions and the respondents were asked to select the ones they considered most appropriate for the new curriculum. These skills and dispositions included: self-respect; critical thinking skills; questioning; self-awareness; fostering good relationships; expressing personal beliefs; developing empathy; developing positive social identities; personal responsibility; developing a sense of conscience; understanding of rights and responsibilities; understanding of the impact of prejudice and discrimination; environmental awareness; and developing views on spiritual and religious matters. The respondents were asked to select up to five skills each. As the option 'do not agree' was not given, it was impossible to establish whether not ticking any represents non-response or disagreement with the stated skills.

Figure 2.4 Proportion of Respondents Strongly Agreeing or Agreeing with Proposed Appropriate Skills and Dispositions for the Proposed Curriculum
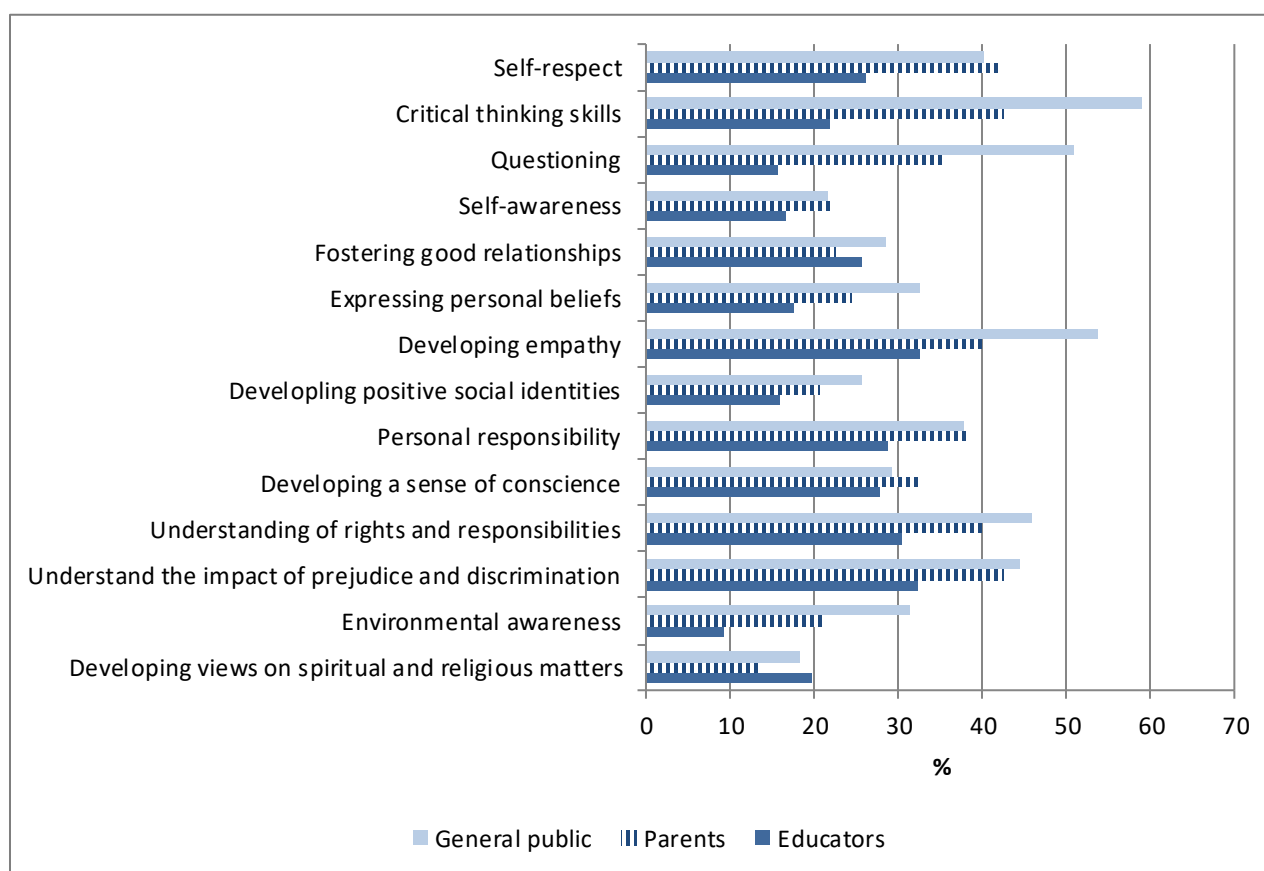
Source: NCCA data 2016 (E=897; P=1,075; GP=283).

Of the skills and dispositions listed, the educators were most supportive of 'understanding of the impact of prejudice and discrimination' (32%), 'understanding of rights and responsibilities' (30%); and personal responsibility (29%) (see Figure 2.4). They were least likely to select 'environmental awareness'. There were no significant differences in educators' responses by school type or years of experience. The respondents were also asked whether the skills and dispositions they selected are being developed in other areas of the current primary school curriculum. About 20 per cent of the educators (just under 600 responded) noted that the skills and dispositions already developed in other areas of the current primary school include understanding of the impact of prejudice and discrimination and spiritual and religious matters (also about 20%). Others identified rights and responsibilities; environmental awareness, personal responsibility; a sense of conscience, among other issues. One-quarter of the respondents argued that many of these skills are already developed as part of a specific curriculum area (mostly SPHE or religious education), across a specific programme (such as Alive-O), Aistear or Learn Together.

The question about appropriate skills was also included in the questionnaire for parents and the general public. As seen in Figure 2.5, the skills parents considered most appropriate for the ERB and Ethics curriculum included developing critical

skills (43%), understanding the impact of prejudice and discrimination (43%) and self-respect (42%). The skills the respondents from the general public considered most appropriate included developing empathy (54%), questioning (51%), and understanding of rights and responsibilities (46%). The main skill areas identified by all stakeholders included critical thinking, empathy, and the impact of prejudice and discrimination.

However, a small number of educators felt that, even though many topics are already covered by the existing curriculum, this may not be done sufficiently.

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

> *Critical thinking skills: not really* [covered by the existing curriculum]*; questioning: in a limited way only; self-awareness: to a limited extent in the SPHE curriculum; fostering good relationships: ostensibly in SPHE; developing a sense of conscience: to a certain extent in SPHE and in a very limited and limiting way in RE* [religious education]*.* (Educator)

It is worth noting that the topic of a theme being 'already covered' by the current curriculum emerged as a response across different questions, irrespective of their content.

Just over one-quarter of the respondents highlighted the need to develop critical thinking.

> *Critical thinking should be an aspect of all areas of curriculum. Developing a sense of conscience would be part of most faith-based curricula. Understanding rights and responsibilities, understanding the impact of prejudice and discrimination and personal responsibility while addressed in other areas of curriculum could be a major focus for new proposed ERB.* (Educator)

> *... the Catholic school of which I am principal already offers all of the aspirations/skills and teaching that the new programme proposes – what I would add however is that it is done in a staged, age-appropriate way and acknowledges that children's learning is not complete when they leave primary school. They will learn more in secondary* [school] *to build on what we offer them.* (Educator)

The next question explored *whether there are skills that should be added* to the proposed curriculum (also responded to by under 600 individuals). A range of topics were suggested, including: active citizenship; the voice of the child; any skills or dispositions that foster positive mental health; assertiveness; decision-making and problem-solving; history of various religious/spiritual movements and what we can learn from them; literacy and numeracy; support for physical and emotional or educational needs; and tolerance of difference in others.

2.5   METHODOLOGIES AND STRATEGIES

The next set of questions concerned methodologies and strategies for teaching ERB and Ethics. The educators were asked which of the given options they considered most appropriate: whole-class discussion; debates; small group work; circle time; pair work; drama, including methods such as role play; assemblies; integrated/cross-curricular projects; thinking time (philosophy with children); games; external visits; links with local community; organisations/groups; practical projects; visual arts; media analysis; and connecting with parents and the community. The respondents were asked to pick up to five options that they considered most relevant.

The educators were most likely to strongly agree or agree with methodologies and strategies, such as whole-class discussion (34%), circle time (24%), thinking time/philosophy (24%), and involvement of parents and the community (23%) (see Figure 2.5). There were no significant differences in the methodologies and strategies preferred by the educators by school sector or years of experience. They were also asked if there were any other methodologies and strategies that they felt were relevant to a curriculum in ERB and Ethics. Overall, a number of different approaches were mentioned, including an enquiry-based approach, case studies, talks, story-telling and project research.

Figure 2.5 Proportion of Educators Identifying Methodologies and Strategies as Being Most Relevant
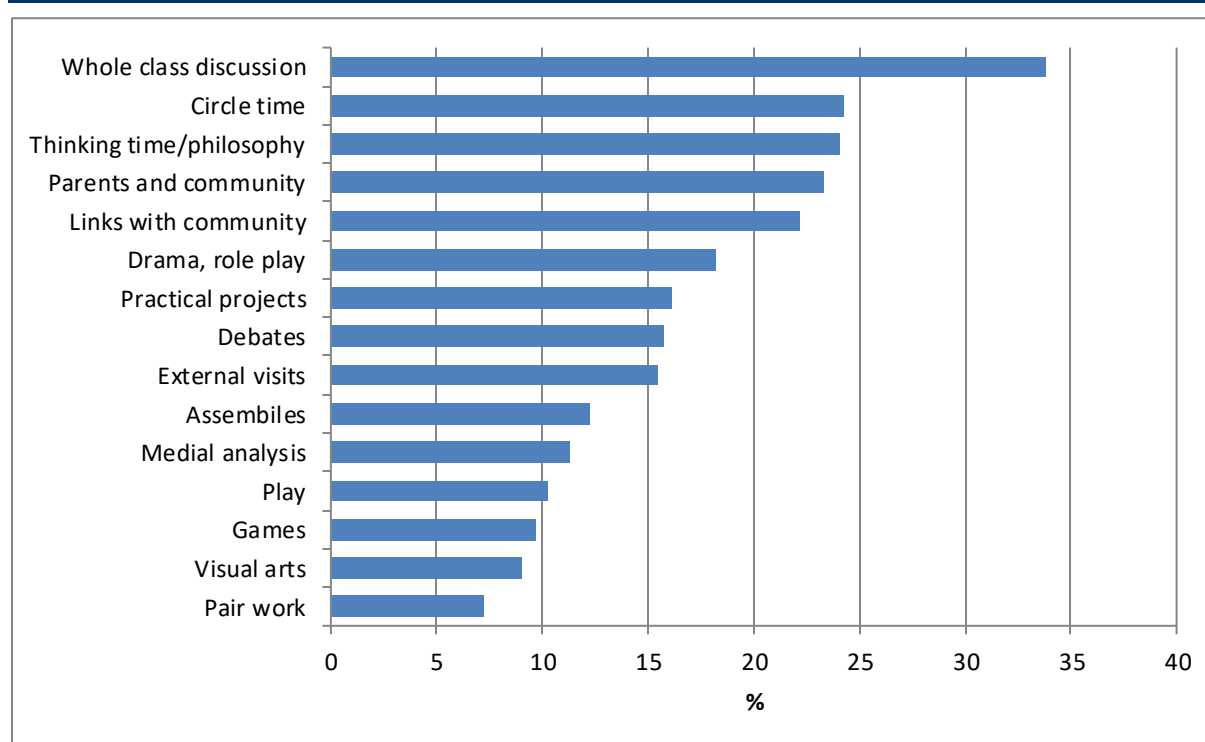
Source: NCCA data 201 (n=897).

2.6 OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

2.6.1 Opportunities

The educators were asked about the potential opportunities provided by the development of the new curriculum in ERB and Ethics. Thirty-four per cent (n=307) of those participating in the survey responded to this question. The responses to the question indicated a wide range of areas, including examining one's own school ethos; offering a balanced approach to learning; supporting inclusivity; promoting respect for diversity; providing a useful framework for teaching; promoting pupils' wellbeing; providing children with valuable life skills; supporting a cross-curricular approach; supporting positive character development in children; promoting school's own ethos; and offering the removal of 'indoctrination'. [24] A theme emerging from the responses across all school types (Catholic, minority religion and multi/interdenominational) was that the proposed module presented an opportunity to enhance inclusivity in schools. This, in turn, was seen to lead to better understanding of the social changes that have taken place in Ireland in recent years and to the promotion of respect for the beliefs of others.

> [It offers a] *chance to make all schools more inclusive and cognisant of the plurality of modern day Ireland.* (Educator, multi/interdenominational school)

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[24] Percentages will not be provided here as in some cases they are very small; instead, broader trends in the responses are discussed.

> [It offers the opportunity for a] *more inclusive school environment. It is important for the holistic development of the child. It will hopefully lead to a better understanding of and respect for the beliefs of others, and their own beliefs.* (Educator, Catholic school)

The proposed curriculum was seen to provide an opportunity to reflect on how schools have changed and how best to address diversity in classrooms. The new curriculum was seen to have the potential to engage with people holding different opinions and beliefs, thus enabling greater understanding among people with different backgrounds.

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

> [The proposed curriculum will provide] *an overview of what is currently being taught in all primary schools and the opportunity to use the information to develop a more inclusive programme for all children. I see it as a great opportunity to reflect the changes in the make-up of our schools and to more readily acknowledge the diversity that is evident in every classroom. (Educator, multi/interdenominational school)*

In addition, it was perceived that the proposed curriculum could help young people to develop a better sense of themselves, and to become aware of their civic responsibilities and social justice.

> [It presents] *opportunities to develop a sense of self and an awareness of others. To develop spiritually and morally and become aware of a sense of responsibility and social justice.* (Educator, minority faith school)

Two responses from the multi/intercultural and minority faith sectors illustrate the perceived contribution of the curriculum to broader social change.

> *All schools … [would] learn about differences and similarities between cultures present in their school and not present also. Children can share what they have learned with their families to enable an intercultural society. Families from minority groups feeling more welcome, involved and validated in schools Children from these families having expertise from their own lives to share in school, building their confidence and allowing them to bring their prior*

knowledge from home to tasks of school. (Educator, multi/interdenominational school)

I think it provides valuable opportunities to enhance and promote an inclusive, progressive society. It also gives children the chance to think critically about these issues and consider their views and those of others. (Educator, minority faith school)

A small number of educators indicated that the proposed curriculum provides teachers with a universal and structured approach to teaching young children about religious beliefs and ethics: 'ERB and Ethics provides an opportunity for a more universally structured programme for the teaching about religious beliefs and ethics' (Educator, Catholic).

The views diverged within school sectors more than between sectors; this was particularly the case for Catholic schools. For example, while some respondents in this sector viewed ERB and Ethics as an opportunity to promote their own ethos, others identified the curriculum's potential to enhance inclusivity in their school.

It just provides more time for faith-based schools to keep promoting their own ethos. (Educator, Catholic school)

It might provide an opportunity for the ethos of a school to be formalised and included in class teaching. (Educator, Catholic school)

It offers schools like my own an opportunity to be more inclusive of children whose families do not conform to the single faith ethos of the school and in so doing that ethos will become more welcoming and embracing. For too long our [Catholic] schools … have believed that they have the monopoly on ethical education. A curriculum … [that involves] ethical debate including metaphysical and spiritual debate will challenge this situation positively. (Educator, Catholic school)

The respondents from Catholic schools seemed to have particularly diverse views about the opportunities the ERB and Ethics may provide. One teacher noted that unless all primary schools are under one patronage, it is difficult to implement the curriculum across all school sectors.

Not sure. Unless all school[s] *are under one umbrella of state patronage/management, I cannot see how individual patronages will offer* [a] *similar belief curriculum. Personally I believe in a national school system under one umbrella so teacher rights and children's access are the same everywhere.* (Educator, Catholic school)

Some (albeit a minority) held particularly strong views on the proposed change in schools.

> *At the moment it's a waste of taxpayer's money as the Catholic schools will not teach it.* (Educator, Catholic school)

> *I am disappointed that the proposed development of such a curriculum does not acknowledge [the] fact that the majority of primary schools in Ireland, which happen to be faith-based school*[s], *are already inclusive in their learning experience, very much nurturing a sense of belonging to all pupils, regardless of religious and economic background as this all-inclusiveness is very compatible with the Christian ethos of these schools. What do these pluralistic proposals hope to achieve? A system like in the UK where it is considered inappropriate to speak about God or one's relationship with God or Jesus Christ except if one is in a high fee paying school where families pay dearly for what is available to most families under the current education system in Ireland?* (Educator, Catholic school)

In some cases, opposition stemmed from the view that many areas proposed by the new curriculum were already covered by the existing curriculum, raising questions about duplication and curriculum overload.

It was evident from the responses that schools do not always rely on teachers to discuss different religions and belief systems with the children. In one Catholic school this was done by their parish priest.

> *[There is a need for a] [b]roader understanding of other religions. However, in my experience, this is already done in religion lessons. Our parish priest enjoys discussing other religions with the children on occasional visits to the classroom.* (Educator, Catholic school)

The pattern of answers about potential opportunities of the proposed curriculum did not differ notably by age, although older educators were somewhat more likely to critique the plan to introduce ERB and Ethics.

2.6.2 Challenges

The educators were asked to indicate what they see as potential challenges associated with the introduction of ERB and Ethics. Thirty-eight per cent (n=348) of educators who participated in the survey responded to this question. As noted in the methodology chapter, it is possible that those holding particular views were more likely to contribute to the survey and to answer this question. Just over half of those commenting on challenges pointed towards curriculum overload and time

as possible barriers to implementation of the curriculum. It is interesting to note that many of these concerns were addressed in the NCCA consultation paper, which explained the vision underpinning the change.

Curriculum overload, time and associated implications were alluded to across all school sectors.

> *As has already been mentioned, curriculum overload. Schools are pushed to the pins of their collars time wise in trying to get the core subjects done and done well … Government obsession with rising standards and PISA type tables. This will always seem to take precedence over the development of a harmonious, happy and creative society. I could see ERB/E* [ERB and Ethics] *integrating well into our LT [Learn Together] programme but Church schools, I would think, would have a difficulty here.* (Educator, multi/interdenominational school)

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

Just over one-quarter noted that the proposed curriculum could be opposed by the Catholic Church and/or parents. Educators from Catholic schools were more likely to point to possible opposition to the curriculum. A small number of respondents from Catholic and minority faith schools commented on the issue of the compatibility between ERB and Ethics and the patron's programme and school ethos – again, issues that were discussed by the NCCA consultation paper.

> *How will it mix with faith-based programmes, especially in junior classes?* (Educator, Catholic school)

> *Schools / Boards of Management should be given the opportunity to use this curriculum area to meet the needs of their individual school. Each school should have the discretion to choose the aspects of the curriculum that complement their ethos. It should certainly be a menu curriculum rather than prescriptive.* (Educator, minority faith school)

About two per cent commented on how receptive teachers may be to the new curriculum. Referring to the potential opposition to the new curriculum by representatives of religious communities and the education sector, one

respondent suggested the curriculum should be made compulsory across the primary sector to counter any objections.

> *A challenge will be the rigid belief systems and prejudices of some of the religious community and figures in the education sector. A solution would be to make this compulsory in the curriculum and hopefully new beliefs will be fostered and prejudices will be overcome!* (Educator, Catholic school)

A few respondents (about three per cent) commented on a perceived lack of support in the implementation of other recent initiatives, feeling that this could potentially compromise the implementation of ERB and Ethics.

> *General lack of support in implementation of other recent initiatives is concerning here too. It's important but not a top priority for schools and teachers at the moment. We have many more pressing matters to consider.* (Educator, Catholic school)

A small number of respondents (about three per cent) commented on teacher preparation and resources.

> *I see challenges in it being less defined for teachers; unless there are guidelines, it could become a washy subject, each section needs to be defined with clear guidelines and examples on how to teach it. Lots of resources and supports are necessary; they can then be adapted for individual classes or students*. (Educator, multi/interdenominational school)

> *Previous lack of curriculum on world religions/traditions* [is a possible challenge]. *Lack of knowledge on the part of teachers may be a disadvantage. Good quality resources and training would be helpful in overcoming this.* (Educator, Catholic school)

> *Teacher training and CPD* [continuing professional development] *will be essential. (Educator, minority faith school)*

While many respondents acknowledged the positive potential of the proposed curriculum, some responses across the three groups participating in the survey were highly critical of the content of the curriculum. Some educators felt that the new programme may clash with the ethos of denominational schools.

> *I would be very anxious that ERB would not supplant the current programme offered in denominational schools, which help foster the school ethos, help parents and parishes foster the pupils' faith (in some cases by sacramental formation). I believe all of the above aims are achieved to a greater extent by the current programmes. (I am more*

acquainted with the Catholic programme.) I believe that the proposed programmes may undermine the ability of schools to flourish and foster their ethos and support parents, families and children with religious convictions in the rights to have faith-based schools. (Educator)

Religious education should follow the programme of the patron in each school and this programme should in no way be compromised. (Educator)

In addition, some respondents from Catholic schools felt that many of the proposed aims are already covered in denominational schools.

Catholic schools currently make provision for inter-religious and intercultural awareness in terms of their policies, ethos, leadership, the programme in religious education and across other curricular areas. It would be good to include examples of these. (Educator)

Other respondents noted that the suggested aims are already covered by other subject areas.

'I feel many of these aims are already covered through subjects like SPHE, geography, religion and history.' (Educator)

I think this is an unnecessary subject. This programme should be incorporated as part of SPHE. (Educator)

Much of what is listed above already takes place in schools through the SPHE curriculum and through various religious programmes. Schools foster these attitudes also through their vision and how they conduct their relationships between pupils, between pupils and staff, between staff members themselves and between the school and the community. This curriculum offers nothing new. (Educator)

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

2.7 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has explored stakeholders' views on different components of the proposed curriculum and the potential opportunities and challenges it would bring. As the impetus for introducing the curriculum emerged from the recommendations of the Forum for Patronage, the survey did not ask whether such

a curriculum should be introduced. Despite the fact that many participants in the survey held strong views on this matter, the majority supported the proposed aims of the curriculum and saw the new curriculum as an opportunity to introduce new dimensions into the curriculum. Others, however, felt that such a curriculum is not needed; that the current curriculum is already overcrowded; and that the suggested topics duplicate a lot of what is already taught in primary schools. As was expected, views diverged along the lines of religious denomination. Teachers in multi/interdenominational schools were more likely to be open to teaching about different religions, beliefs and acknowledging people's rights to hold secular views as well as supporting character development and social justice. Interestingly, views diverged markedly within the Catholic school sector, with some teachers arguing for removing religious instruction from schools and making faith formation the responsibility of parents, while others argued for maintaining the present practice. Overall, survey respondents felt that primary school children would benefit from knowing about different religions and cultures, and that young children should be taught about diversity and tolerance. The policy implications arising from this consultation paper are discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Conclusions and Implications for Policy

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In 2011, the then Minister for Education and Skills, Mr. Ruairí Quinn, established the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector, setting up an Advisory Group for the Forum, which sought submissions from parents, patrons, teachers and the wider community on proposed structural changes in the Irish primary school sector. Following an extensive consultation process (see Chapter 1 for description), the Forum made recommendations on steps that could be taken to ensure that the education system provides a sufficiently diverse number and range of primary schools to cater for children of all religions and none. The Forum concluded that 'the State has a responsibility to ensure that all children have the right to receive Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics' (Coolahan et al., 2012, p. 111). The report of the Forum made recommendations in a number of areas including:

- planning towards future patronage arrangements and having a more diverse range of patronage types for new schools in areas of rising population;

- the practicalities of achieving divesting of patronage where there is a stable population and a demand for diversity of school types;

- Irish language provision; and

- the creation of more inclusive schools.

Stemming from the recommendations provided by the report, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) was tasked by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) with developing a new curriculum in ERB and Ethics for all primary schools in Ireland. In 2015, the NCCA started its own extensive consultation process to ensure a balanced approach to the development of the curriculum.

While the impetus for introducing the new curriculum came from recommendations provided by the report by Coolahan et al. (2012), the NCCA has taken a broader view on exploring 'what children should learn and to what purpose in all schools beyond 2016' (NCCA, 2015b, p. 5). The curriculum, Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB), is intended to help:

> *children to know about and understand the cultural heritage of the major forms of religion, belief traditions and world views 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. (NCCA, 2015b, p. 6)

The aims of Ethics education include:

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. (NCCA, 2015b, p. 6).

The approach taken in developing the new curriculum acknowledges the fact that children learn about religion and morals in a number of social contexts, including family, community and school. Schools can influence children's dispositions and actions by providing a safe, supportive and inclusive space for the discussion of values, ethics and different belief systems. While a formal approach in this context is important, children's dispositions can also be influenced by informal interaction with teachers, peers and other members of the school community.

This consultation paper forms part of a broader consultation process initiated by the NCCA regarding the proposed ERB and Ethics curriculum. The information provided here is based on over 2,000 responses to an online survey of educators, parents and members of the general public. Such online surveys traditionally yield a lower response rate and a more skewed sample than face-to-face interviews (see Chapter 1 for discussion), as the respondents are not selected at random and because they tend to attract people holding particularly strong views on the topic. Other individuals may have chosen not to participate for a variety of reasons or may not have been aware of the survey. Some of the questions were strongly skewed towards positive answers so the survey does not tap into more critical views (except in the open-ended questions). As a result, the findings presented in this consultation paper cannot be seen as generalisable to the wider population. Nonetheless, they yield interesting insights into perceptions of the proposed curriculum.

The aim of this consultation paper was to answer the following research questions:

- To what extent do educators, parents and the general public agree with the proposed aims for the ERB and Ethics curriculum?

- What skills and dispositions do educators, parents and the general public expect the ERB and Ethics curriculum to develop?

- What methods and approaches are seen as most suitable for the delivery of the ERB and Ethics curriculum?

- From a policy perspective, how should the curriculum for primary school children be structured to provide them with the skills and dispositions needed in order to thrive in an increasingly diverse and multicultural environment?

- What challenges and opportunities does the proposed curriculum offer for the primary school sector?

3.2   MAIN FINDINGS

3.2.1 Aims for the Curriculum

Existing research has highlighted the need to promote a greater understanding of diversity among pupils (Maylor et al., 2007). A mono-cultural curriculum tends to reflect the histories and identities of the majority population. This is often reflected in the provision of religious education in state-funded schools. Chapter 1 indicated that while in some jurisdictions religious education is compulsory, in others ethics or values education is presented as an alternative or a combination of approaches is provided. Over time, policy focus has moved towards the need to create tolerant and mutually respectful societies in order to promote equality and social cohesion. Eurobarometer (2015) findings indicate that in Ireland, over half of the adult population feel that discrimination on the basis of ethnic origin is widespread. In addition, the majority of adults felt that the school curriculum should address diversity in ethnic origin, religion and beliefs, gender diversity and identity (see Chapter 1). Thus, while the consultation survey findings cannot be seen as generalisable to the whole population, they are located against a backdrop of public support for schools to address diversity.

In the NCCA survey, educators, parents and members of the general public provided their views on the proposed aims for the ERB and Ethics curriculum. An overall majority of educators broadly agreed with all six proposed aims and were most likely to strongly support statements relating to human diversity, rights and responsibilities and the impact of prejudice and discrimination. The views differed by school sector (Catholic, minority religion, multi/interdenominational and other), with respondents from the multi/interdenominational sector more likely to strongly support aims relating to aspects of character development and diversity.[25] Almost three-quarters of parents (73%) strongly supported aims associated with recognition of unfairness, injustice, and the impact of discrimination, as well as

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[25] The category of 'other' included individuals representing higher education or early childhood sectors, among others.

development of self-awareness, confidence, personal beliefs and forming positive identities. Parents with children attending multi/interdenominational schools were somewhat more likely to support aims about human diversity, relationships with others and curiosity about religions. However, it is important to note that respondents' views also varied within school types. Like the educators and parents, members of the general public broadly supported the proposed aims of the curriculum, especially in areas such as the impact of discrimination and relating to others. Members of the general public were more likely than parents to strongly support aims relating to respect for beliefs and values and curiosity about religions.

The educators considered the suggested aims sufficiently extensive. About 30 per cent felt that no additional aims or ideas needed to be added. The aims that were suggested – by a small number of respondents – included character development and moral values, among others. Over half of the educators wanted to retain all suggested aims. However, under one-quarter of those responding to the survey felt that many were already covered by the primary school curriculum. The survey findings indicated that the stakeholders were broadly supportive of the suggested aims and ideas. However, it was evident that there was some confusion about the position of the suggested curriculum in the existing structure. Many thought that as several areas are already covered by the current primary school curriculum, either through specific subject areas or in particular programmes, the new curriculum would duplicate what is already provided. The position of faith formation and sacraments in the curriculum proved to be divisive, with some stakeholders arguing for the status quo while others alluded to the discriminatory nature of current practice that gives prominence to one religion.[26]

3.2.2 Skills and Dispositions

All stakeholders in this study were asked to comment on the appropriate skills and dispositions that should be fostered by the proposed curriculum.[27] The educators were most supportive of areas that help children to deal with prejudice and discrimination, develop empathy, and awareness of rights and responsibilities. Parents were most supportive of providing children with critical thinking skills, helping them to understand the impact of prejudice and discrimination, and helping them to develop self-respect. The members of the general public also considered the development of critical thinking skills as a priority; followed by development of empathy and questioning. The responses show that there was

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[26] While faith formation and sacraments are not a feature of the primary school curriculum, they are, however, a feature of denominational patron programmes.

[27] Dispositions are frequent and voluntary habits of thinking and doing: 'a pattern of behaviour exhibited frequently in the absence of coercion constituting a habit of mind under some conscious and voluntary control intentional and oriented to broad goals' (Katz, 1993, p. 16). They are acquired, supported or weakened by interactive experiences in an environment with significant adults and peers (Bertram and Pascal, 2002).

consensus across the stakeholders in supporting skills and forming dispositions in the field of social justice and equality.

Parents held diverging views about the potential contribution the curriculum could make. While the majority felt that children would benefit from learning about different belief systems and the importance of respecting people who do not subscribe to any, a few noted that by enrolling their child in a denominational school they had made a conscious choice for the child to receive faith formation. It is worth pointing out that one approach to learning does not necessarily exclude the other. However, balance is needed and parents' views should be taken into account. Views varied more within the denominational sector than they did between sectors.

The new curriculum was also seen as representing an opportunity to contribute to areas such as social norms and morals; equality and tolerance; and human rights and responsibilities. Ethics was considered useful, and was, by some parents, seen as a good substitute for faith formation in denominational schools. Members of the general public were most likely to perceive value in: teaching children about various religions and none; promoting diversity and tolerance; promoting reflection on social norms; and fostering critical thinking.

3.2.3 Methodologies and Strategies

In order to promote respect and tolerance, numerous authors have highlighted the need for a culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy.[28] From this perspective, the cultural and social identities of pupils are seen as assets rather than as deficits or limitations. These identities are not ignored in education but become triggers and resources for learning.

The survey sought educators' views on the appropriate methodologies and strategies to be used to deliver the proposed curriculum. Of the listed options, they were particularly in favour of utilising whole-class discussion as an approach, followed by circle time, thinking time/philosophy, and links with parents and the community. There were no significant differences between the respondents' views by school type or years of experience. An open question explored what other strategies should be used in delivering the curriculum. The responses given were very varied, with no one methodology dominating. The suggested approaches included: enquiry-based approach, case studies, talks and story-telling, among others. Active teaching techniques rooted in inquiry-based learning are likely to

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[28] See NCCRESt (2016).

support pupil engagement. This approach promotes the development of critical thinking, active learning and in-depth information processing (Minner et al., 2010).

3.2.4   Structuring the Curriculum

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

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

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

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

3.2.5 Opportunities and Challenges

The educators saw a number of potential opportunities provided by the proposed curriculum. These included: examining one's own school ethos; offering a balanced approach to learning; supporting inclusivity in schools; promoting respect for diversity; providing a useful framework for teaching; promoting pupils' wellbeing; providing children with valuable life skills; supporting a cross-curricular approach; supporting positive character development in children; and offering the removal of religious instruction from schools. Although views were broadly similar across school sectors in terms of the potential of the curriculum to enhance areas already addressed by schools, such as diversity and tolerance, views tended to diverge regarding the position of faith instruction and sacraments in the school. In fact, some educators from Catholic and minority religion schools felt that the curriculum may challenge the ethos of their school. Some educators also felt that they would not like to see the denominational ethos of the school changed, while others commented on potential opposition from Church authorities, faith communities and some parents.

Curriculum overload and time constraints were seen as the biggest challenges by the educators. Respondents were concerned about duplication with subjects such as SPHE, RE and other curriculum areas. It seemed, however, that many respondents had not engaged with the consultation / background papers regarding the position of ERB and Ethics, which explained issues around the compatibility of the proposed curriculum with existing patrons' programmes in different school types as well as the issue of taking an age-appropriate approach to teaching sensitive topics in an inclusive way. It was clear that all stakeholders need additional information about the practical implementation of the curriculum. Clarity is also required regarding the potential overlap of the new curriculum with other subjects, in order to avoid duplication.

3.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF EDUCATION ABOUT RELIGION BELIEFS AND ETHICS

Schools are places where children have daily contact with the range of values and worldviews, which shape individual identities. Milot (2007), in a report for the Council of Europe on religious diversity and intercultural education, notes that irrespective of the school context (secular or denominational), all of them share certain features:

- heterogeneity of pupils, even within the same religious tradition, as religious practices and beliefs differ between and within families;

- variation in contemporary societies in views regarding what constitutes a 'good' life, , with such views stemming from various religious and non-religious perspectives; and

- the inappropriateness of asking children to abandon a large part of their identity in order to form a relationship with others, as they do not leave their values and convictions outside the classroom (ibid, p. 22).

The manner in which educational systems frame children's moral and religious development raises different issues for majority and minority faith groups, as well as those without religious affiliation (Tinker and Smart, 2012).

This consultation paper has considered a number of aspects of the proposed curriculum. The analysis of the data provided by educators, parents and members of the general public indicates strong support for aspects of the curriculum relating to promoting diversity, tolerance, social justice and understanding of the impact of discrimination. This is in line with the Eurobarometer findings, which also reflected public desire for inclusion of diversity in lessons and school materials. It is important to note that there is no specific (Catholic, minority religion, multi/interdenominational) perspective in respondents' answers; while differences were found between these school types, views were also divergent within school types. Most of those who are supportive of the aims and approach of the proposed new curriculum are teaching in Catholic schools, simply because the majority of educators who responded teach in Catholic schools. Thus there are likely to be supporters as well as critics of the new curriculum across school denomination categories. Given that the self-selection of respondents is likely to over-represent those with strong (negative or positive) views, it may be that the figures in the report overstate the extent of disagreement/agreement; nonetheless, the report raises important issues for curriculum implementation.

There was a lack of consensus on how the proposed curriculum fits with the ethos of denominational schools. The views of the stakeholders participating in this study diverged considerably regarding the provision of faith formation and sacraments in state-funded schools during the school day, with some seeing the introduction of the new curriculum as an opportunity to remove faith formation from schools, or at least move it outside the school day. Others were concerned that the new curriculum could potentially clash with the patron's programme in denominational schools and with the religious ethos of these schools. It could be argued that some patrons' programmes and aspects of the new curriculum cover similar areas around equality and rights, so a clash is not inevitable, as noted in the NCCA discussion document (NCCA, 2015b). Furthermore, many teachers from multi/interdenominational and denominational schools argued that several areas that featured in the questionnaire are already covered either in SPHE, religious education or other subject areas or programmes, such as Learn Together. As the new curriculum aims to value all children equally, and to recognise everybody's

background and beliefs, this should fit in with the ethos of all school types; it is not something that children need to 'opt out' of.

Curriculum implementation cannot take place in a vacuum, but needs to be supported by sufficient initial teacher preparation in the areas of diversity (ethnic, religious, socio-economic, gender and other), equality, social justice, character development and the development of an inclusive whole-school approach. A whole-school approach can be defined as a holistic approach in a school that has been strategically constructed to improve student learning, behaviour and wellbeing, and that provides the conditions that support these (Lavis, 2015). The approach involves all members of the school community, including school management, school staff, students, parents and the broader community, working together in promoting a sense of belonging and cohesion. Initial teacher education should prepare new teachers for working in diverse classroom environments and teaching sensitive topics. Adequate continuous professional development – a concern raised by educators participating in this survey – should be available to all teachers, as well as school principals. Such professional development is all the more important in a context where most teachers and principals themselves came through an educational system that taught them little about the specific content of other religious and secular belief systems.

Finally, the authors acknowledge that while the stakeholders share a consensus in a number of areas relating to the curriculum, resolving broader issues such as convincing educators and parents of the need to implement the new curriculum remains a challenge. Considering stakeholders' diverse backgrounds, it is likely that some individuals or groups may actively oppose the introduction of the new curriculum. It is worth noting that there are challenges involved in moving faith formation outside the school day in terms of the logistics of childcare arrangements, school transport and so on. However, an emphasis on informing stakeholders of the main aims around equality, social justice and human rights may facilitate schools in integrating the proposed curriculum into their existing ethos in order to provide a more inclusive school culture. It is envisaged that the ERB and Ethics curriculum will introduce new approaches and strands to the existing primary school curriculum while linking up with the existing curriculum in order to provide children in all schools with the skills for living together in a multicultural society.

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Appendix 1

Educator Questionnaire

Introduction and details

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. I am responding as a:

Primary teacher (including principals)   ❏₁

Student teacher   ❏₂

Third-level educator   ❏₃

Early childhood professional Post-primary teacher   ❏₄

Other (please specify)   ❏₅

2. What position do you hold in your school?

Other (please specify)

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

4. What type of school do you teach in?

Other (please specify)

Aims

The general aims of the proposed curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics support those of the 1999 Primary School Curriculum, the Aistear Framework and the Intercultural Education Guidelines.

5. The proposed aims for the curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics are listed below. To what extent do you agree or disagree that these are appropriate for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
ERB and Ethics should enable children to develop self-awareness, confidence, personal beliefs and positive social identities.	❏₁	❏₂	❏₃	❏₄	❏₅
ERB and Ethics should enable children to have a knowledge and understanding of how religions and belief traditions have contributed to the culture in which we live.	❏₁	❏₂	❏₃	❏₄	❏₅
ERB and Ethics should enable children to express comfort, empathy and joy with human diversity.	❏₁	❏₂	❏₃	❏₄	❏₅
ERB and Ethics should enable children to form deep, caring human connections.	❏₁	❏₂	❏₃	❏₄	❏₅
ERB and Ethics should enable children to understand the relationship between rights and responsibilities.	❏₁	❏₂	❏₃	❏₄	❏₅
ERB and Ethics should enable children to appreciate the impact of prejudice and discrimination.	❏₁	❏₂	❏₃	❏₄	❏₅

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

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

Please state why.

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Strands

The five strands or areas proposed for the curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics are: p*ersonal understanding; mutual understanding; spiritual awareness; character education;* and *connection to the wider world*. To read more about the content of each strand, download our Consultation Paper here.

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

	Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Personal understanding	❑1	❑2	❑3	❑4	❑5
Mutual understanding	❑1	❑2	❑3	❑4	❑5
Spiritual awareness	❑1	❑2	❑3	❑4	❑5
Character education	❑1	❑2	❑3	❑4	❑5
Connection to the wider world	❑1	❑2	❑3	❑4	❑5

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

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

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Skills and dispositions

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

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

Self-respect	❏1
Critical thinking skills	❏2
Questioning	❏3
Self-awareness	❏4
Fostering good relationships	❏5
Expressing personal beliefs	❏6
Developing empathy	❏7
Developing positive social identities	❏8
Personal responsibility	❏9
Developing a sense of conscience	❏10
Understanding of rights and responsibilities	❏11
Understand the impact of prejudice and discrimination	❏12
Environmental awareness	❏13
Developing views on spiritual and religious matters	❏14

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

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

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

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

14. Methodologies and strategies

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

Whole class discussion	$\square_1$
Debates	$\square_2$
Small group work	$\square_3$
Circle time	$\square_4$
Pair work	$\square_5$
Drama: role play, etc.	$\square_6$
Assemblies	$\square_7$
Integrated/cross-curricular projects	$\square_8$
Thinking time (Philosophy with children)	$\square_9$
Games	$\square_{10}$
External visits	$\square_{11}$
Links with local community organisations/ groups	$\square_{12}$
Practical projects	$\square_{13}$
Visual arts	$\square_{14}$
Media analysis	$\square_{15}$
Connecting with parents and the community	$\square_{16}$
Play	$\square_{17}$

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

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

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

Opportunities and challenges

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

The question then of what this curriculum will look like is becoming important. Will ERB and Ethics be a curriculum area, similar to Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE), with subjects

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

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

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

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

Appendix 2

Parent/Guardian Questionnaire

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

If you have more questions, you may find answers in the Consultation Paper here. Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts. We value your feedback.

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

Catholic School ❑1

Church of Ireland School ❑2

Educate Together ❑3

Community National School ❑4

Other (please specify) ❑5

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

Junior infants ☐₁

Senior infants ☐₂

First class ☐₃

Second class ☐₄

Third class ☐₅

Fourth class ☐₆

Fifth class ☐₇

Sixth Class ☐₈

Aims and ideas

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

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

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

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

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

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

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

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

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

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

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

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

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

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

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

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

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

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

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

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

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

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

Self-respect ☐1	Fostering good relationships ☐9
Developing positive social identities ☐2	Understanding the impact of prejudice and discrimination ☐10
Critical thinking skills ☐3	Expressing personal beliefs ☐11
Personal responsibility ☐4	Environmental awareness ☐12
Questioning ☐5	Developing empathy ☐13
Developing a sense of conscience ☐6	Developing views of spiritual and religious matters ☐14
Self-awareness ☐7	
Understanding of rights and responsibilities ☐8	

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

Appendix 3

General Public Questionnaire

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Aims and ideas

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

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

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

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

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

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

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

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

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

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

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

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

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

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

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

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

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

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

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

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

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

Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○

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

Self-respect ☐ 1	Fostering good relationships ☐ 9
Developing positive social identities ☐ 2	Understanding the impact of prejudice and discrimination ☐ 10
Critical thinking skills ☐ 3	Expressing personal beliefs ☐ 11
Personal responsibility ☐ 4	Environmental awareness ☐ 12
Questioning ☐ 5	Developing empathy ☐ 13
Developing a sense of conscience ☐ 6	Developing views of spiritual and religious matters ☐ 14
Self-awareness ☐ 7	
Understanding of rights and responsibilities ☐ 8	

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

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