**National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) consultation on**

**Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics**

The Council for Catechetics of the Bishops’ Conference and the Catholic Schools Partnership held a round-table conversation in Dublin on the 26th November 2015 to review the NCCA proposals. This meeting was attended by 28 people involved in first, second and third level Catholic Religious Education. It was agreed that these notes on the conversation would be circulated to assist respondents in making submissions to the NCCA.

In making responses to the NCCA consultation it is recommended that respondents deal with some or all of the following issues depending on their experience and expertise.

* 1. Potential philosophical problems with the proposals. The intellectual presuppositions of the proposal appear to conflict with a religious education based on faith commitment.
  2. The proposals are arguably inspired more by an adult, intellectual critique of religions than the childhood experience of living in a world informed by religious and other beliefs.
  3. The Catholic understanding of religious education is committed to inter-religious dialogue. In a changing socio-demographic context in Ireland awareness needs to be heightened of this important dimension of denominational religious education.
  4. Catholic schools currently make provision for inter-religious and inter-cultural 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.
  5. Similarly, Catholic schools currently make provision for ethics in terms of school policies, school ethos, school leadership, religious education and across other curricular areas. It would be good for respondents to the NCCA consultation process to include examples of these.
  6. Parents, families and children with religious convictions have a right to give expression to these in faith-based schools. Such schools adopt a child-centred, holistic approach to education where religious belief is not compartmentalised but is fully acknowledged as part of lived reality for these parents, families and children.
  7. Arguably, the proposals have more in common with a curriculum in inter-cultural studies than religious education.
  8. Religious education in faith-based schools is inseparable from the characteristic spirit of the school. The Education Act specifically requires the Minister to have regard for the characteristic spirit of the school in exercising his or her functions with regard to curriculum {section 30(2)(b)}. Further, the Minister must allow reasonable instruction time in the school day for subjects relating to or arising from the characteristic spirit of the school {section 30(2)(d)}.Thus NCCA proposals in areas impinging on religious education and the characteristic spirit of the school are of a different nature than other NCCA proposals. This is already acknowledged in the area of Relationships and Sexuality Education as part of the NCCA SPHE curriculum where it is explicitly acknowledged that the curriculum must be interpreted in the context of the characteristic spirit of the school.
  9. The NCCA suggest four possible approaches

1. ERB and Ethics as part of the patron’s programme
2. ERB and Ethics integrated across curriculum areas
3. ERB and Ethics as a discrete curriculum
4. ERB and Ethics as having both discrete and integrated components

Given the accepted reality of existing curriculum overload and serious time constraints it appears implausible to propose a discrete curriculum. In addition, it was argued that if such a discrete curriculum was developed on the philosophical basis suggested in the current proposals then this would conflict with the existing faith-based religious education programme and the characteristic spirit in Catholic schools. ERB and Ethics integrated across curriculum areas would arguably raise even more serious questions for the expression of the characteristic spirit of the school. The determination of the ethos or characteristic spirit of a school is not the function of the NCCA or the Minister. Curriculum proposals in sensitive areas should take account of the fact that faith-based schools are committed to a particular understanding of the human person. It was felt that further consultation should take place between the NCCA and patrons of faith-based schools on how the concerns behind the NCCA proposals might be addressed through the patrons’ programmes and by a set of guidelines for all schools.

The NCCA website has an on-line questionnaire and they have also invited written submissions. The questionnaire provides very limited scope for dealing with the issues and frames them in a certain way. A written submission will provide respondents with a better mechanism to express their views.

Three useful publications

CSP, *Catholic Primary Schools in a Changing Ireland – Sharing Good Practice on Inclusion of All Pupils*, Maynooth 2015, available at <http://www.catholicschools.ie/2015/03/12/catholic-primary-schools-in-a-changing-ireland/>.

Anne Hession, *Catholic Primary Religious Education in a Pluralist Environment*, Veritas, 2015.

Dermot A. Lane, *Challenges Facing Religious Education in Contemporary Ireland*, Veritas 2008.