

# Religious Education at the Heart of our Primary Schools

Response to the National Council for Curriculum  
and Assessment (NCCA) Consultation on Time  
and Structure in a Primary Curriculum



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

May 2017

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Assessment (NCCA) Consultation on Time and Structure  
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# Background

In December 2016, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) began a consultation process on time and structure in a revised primary curriculum ([www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum\\_and\\_Assessment/Early\\_Childhood\\_and\\_Primary\\_Education/Primary-Education/Primary\\_Developments/Structure-and-Time-Allocation](http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Early_Childhood_and_Primary_Education/Primary-Education/Primary_Developments/Structure-and-Time-Allocation)). Submissions were invited from teachers, principals, and partners in education. The Irish Bishops' Conference, through the Commission for Catholic Education and Formation, chaired by Bishop Brendan Leahy, presented the submission contained here. It was prepared following extensive engagement across four dioceses with teachers and principals working in Catholic primary schools. A working group of the Council for Catechetics assisted in the development of the submission, which was then forwarded to the National Council for Catechetics in May 2017.

The Irish Bishops' Conference wishes to thank all those who engaged with them in the production of this response, including all those teachers, principals and Chairs of Boards of Management who attended regional meetings to discuss the NCCA proposals.

# Introduction

The Commission for Catholic Education and Formation of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference welcomes the opportunity to respond to the NCCA consultation on time and structure within the primary curriculum. While the Commission values the existence of some positive proposals within the consultation document, *Proposals for Structure and Time Allocation in a Redeveloped Primary Curriculum: For Consultation*, it has serious reservations about the educational philosophy operative throughout.

The Commission is concerned about the relative neglect of the spiritual, moral and religious dimensions of teaching and learning within the core curriculum. The primary concern is the removal of Religious Education from the core curriculum into what the NCCA is terming 'flexible time'. It is our view that the removal of Religious Education from the core curriculum will have the following consequences, unintended or otherwise: a) the reduction of Religious Education to the same level as a roll call or an assembly or recreation time; b) the privatisation of faith, with all its negative consequences for education and for society; c) the removal of the prophetic dimensions of the Judaeo-Christian tradition so needed in these changing and challenging times; d) the neglect of an important resource for integrated and interdisciplinary learning within the curriculum.

The disconnect between some recent documents from the NCCA (e.g. *Education about Religion and Belief (ERB) and Ethics in the Primary School: Consultation Paper*, and proposals in relation to *Goodness Me, Goodness You*) and the heretofore positive documents of the NCCA on primary and post-primary education is a cause of major concern.

Moreover, some of the assumptions surrounding Religious Education, especially denominational education, within the consultative document leave a lot to be desired. Equally, the Commission regrets the inadequate treatment of the characteristic spirit of the school.

It would be a pity if the common ground shared between the bishops and the NCCA up to now was to be lost. It would be a backward step if old caricatures were allowed to colour the necessary dialogue about what is best for the education of the next generation of children who will grow up in a world very different to the present one.

The reflections that follow are offered in the spirit of constructive dialogue that should be allowed to inform and shape the future of educational provision in primary schools in Ireland.

## **THE CONTEXT OF OUR RESPONSE: VALUING THE SPIRITUAL, RELIGIOUS AND MORAL DIMENSIONS OF THE PERSON**

Universal concerns about life, its meaning and direction, find a response in the Christian understanding of the full flourishing of the human person in this world and the next. Catholic schools serve society in many ways in the light of their dynamic Christian vision. Their contribution is regularly acknowledged locally. Indeed, all surveys demonstrate a very high level of parental satisfaction with the service provided by Catholic schools. Inclusive and welcoming of all, they seek to be places of excellence in teaching and learning. Among the ways Catholic schools contribute to society is their response to many parents' wish to have their children educated in accordance with their religious convictions and out of a shared understanding of the person.

Catholic schools seek to provide space, both intellectual and emotional, where pupils can explore and imagine a world with a broad spiritual, religious and moral horizon, inviting them to understand themselves in solidarity with other people, especially those most in need, being responsible for the world, and open to mature relationships with others and with God. This broad spiritual horizon is important today, as children inhabit a complex world driven often by a consumer-focused and materialistic vision of life.

In contemporary Western society, the dialogue between religion and the secular world is increasingly recognised as necessary because of the mutual benefits from such a dialogue (See Habermas et al., 2010)



## POSITIVES AND NEGATIVES IN THE CONSULTATION DOCUMENT

In engaging with the consultation document prepared by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the Commission for Catholic Education and Formation of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference notes some positive dimensions and some significant challenges.

### Positives

The continuing recognition of the importance of integrated learning in the early stages of a child's education is to be commended. This approach to learning, so present in the 1999 curriculum and which has had much success, should indeed be continued and supported in early-years learning and right throughout the school.

It is good to see the presence of environmental education within the core curriculum. Likewise, it is positive to see the emphasis placed on social, personal and health education within the core curriculum. The centrality given to language and literacy is valuable.

### Challenges/Difficulties Particularly Relating to Religious Education

Holistic thinking around the spiritual, moral and religious dimensions of the young person, present in other elements of NCCA's work, is markedly absent in what is being proposed in the current consultation documents on time and structure.

The primary concern is the removal of Religious Education from the core curriculum into what the NCCA is terming 'flexible time'. The concept of flexible time as it relates to a very important area of learning - Religious Education - is problematic. Religious Education in the same space as roll call and break time makes no educational sense, either practically or theoretically.

The NCCA proposal to remove religion from the core curriculum is a retrograde step from an educational, spiritual and religious point of view. It is contrary to the notion of an integrated learning experience. The removal of Religious Education from the core curriculum will have the following consequences, unintended or otherwise:

- a. The reduction of Religious Education to the same level as roll call, assembly or recreation time
- b. The privatisation of faith, with all its negative consequences for education and for society
- c. The removal of the prophetic dimensions of the Judaeo-Christian tradition so needed in these changing and challenging times
- d. The neglect of an important resource for integrated and interdisciplinary learning within the curriculum

### **AT VARIANCE WITH OTHER NCCA DOCUMENTATION**

This proposed neglect of spiritual, religious and moral dimensions within the core curriculum is disappointing because it is at variance with other NCCA documentation.

In the 1999 curriculum, Religious Education was recognised as one subject among others, and was understood to have a core function within the curriculum. The introduction to the 1999 curriculum states that, 'The curriculum takes cognisance of the affective, aesthetic, spiritual, moral and religious dimensions of the child's experience and development. For most people in Ireland, the totality of the human condition cannot be understood or explained merely in terms of physical and social experience' (NCCA, 1999, p. 27).

This view of the spiritual, religious and moral dimensions of the person is also found in more recent curricular initiatives by the NCCA. For example, the spiritual life of the adolescent is addressed in both the *Junior Cycle Guidelines on Wellbeing* (2017) and in the *Junior Cycle Framework* (2015).

The definition of wellbeing provided within the *Guidelines on Wellbeing* encompasses social, emotional, intellectual, environmental, physical and spiritual wellbeing (p. 17). It is interesting, for example, to note the kind of learning recommended by the *Guidelines on Wellbeing* is that which speaks to a rich cross-curricular acknowledgement of the deeply spiritual, moral and religious dimensions of the young person's life.

These dimensions are clearly attended to through the eight principles, twenty-four statements of learning and eight key skills in the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015).

The NCCA has elsewhere acknowledged the spiritual dimension of young children's learning as integral to the child's overall development (NCCA, 2009, p. 17) and its naming of the spiritual dimension of life in *Aistear* is significant.

## A REGRETTABLE MARGINALISATION

Notwithstanding the NCCA's positive approach at post-primary level to furthering the young person's spiritual, moral and religious life, it seems there is a mysterious reluctance in the NCCA's current consultation on time and structure to engage with the spiritual aspect of children's make-up. The proposals move in the direction of sidelining and isolating religion from engagement within the education endeavour as a whole.

While the NCCA's consultation document describes curriculum as 'the collection of stories which one generation chooses to tell the

next about the world in which they live' (Looney, 2016, quoted in NCCA, *Proposals for Structure and Time Allocation in a Redeveloped Primary Curriculum: For Consultation*, 2016, p. 5), in reality, in this consultation, the spiritual and religious dimensions of a child's life appear to carry little or no real weight in this 'sharing of our collection of stories'. For example, the spiritual and religious are clearly absent in the table outlining what is called a 'Global Framework of Learning Domains' presented by NCCA as part of the consultation document (p. 30).

At regional meetings held to discuss the NCCA consultation documents\*, teachers, principals and chairs of boards of management expressed many concerns, in particular around how the movement of Religious Education into flexible time would gravely impact on the teaching of Religious Education. Principals and chairs of boards were also concerned about the potential impact such a move would have on the school's ability to preserve and promote its ethos. They noted the difficulties it will create for them in finding and securing time within flexible time for Religious Education.

There is concern that reluctance to engage with the spiritual aspect of children's make-up is becoming a consistent trend. It is found in *Better Outcomes, Brighter Future: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014), which also fails to give due consideration to the spiritual aspect of children's make-up. The spiritual dimension of children's development was also marginalised in the formation of a national set of child wellbeing indicators in 2005.

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\* Four meetings of principals, teachers and chairs of boards of management were held. Over sixty-five individuals attended these meetings which were co-hosted by CPSMA and the Council for Catechetics. These meetings presented the proposals from NCCA on time and structure as contained in the consultation documents and acted as a space for dialogue on questions arising from these documents.

*Growing Up In Ireland* (ESRI, 2008), the most significant longitudinal research project following the progress of 8,500 nine-year-olds and 11,000 nine-month-olds in Ireland, also neglects the spirituality of children, including its religious manifestation. Writing about this omission, Greene et al. (2010), whilst acknowledging the importance of cultural and religious values, state that from the outset, data pertaining to religion would not be sought. No reason for such exclusion is proffered.

All of these omissions are troubling in light of international research, such as that of Rees, Francis and Robbins (2005), that highlights the importance of spirituality for the wellbeing of children.

While the NCCA's conviction of the importance of evaluating the extent to which schools are catering for the needs of young children in Ireland today (Fitzpatrick, Twohig and Morgan, 2014, p. 272) is laudable, we feel we need to voice our serious concern around the proposed marginalisation of the spiritual dimension of children's lives in primary education.

The consultation documentation refers to the *Aistear* programme; however, in *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009), there are no specific guidelines for time allocation for spiritual or Religious Education and, without clearer delineation, the question arises as to how the place of spiritual development can be prioritised within the framework. This, coupled with the fact that much pre-service provision for teachers in early childhood settings has no content devoted to educating pre-service teachers in the area of either Religious Education or education for spiritual development, suggests that spiritual development may become increasingly marginalised.

## THE VOICE OF THE IRISH CHILD

In all of this, a voice that is unfortunately significantly lacking is that of the Irish child. Lenzer, one of the key thinkers in the academic field of childhood studies, which conceptualises childhood as a distinct social class and highlights the importance of giving voice to children, demonstrates how understandings of the child can be almost exclusively constructed by adults (2000, p. 185).

In light of recent Irish studies of children's experiences of spiritual education (Smyth, 2010; Kitching and Shanneik, 2015; O'Farrell, 2016; Keating, 2016), Lenzer's contention may pertain to the Irish context also. The voices of children illustrate their positive experience of formative Religious Education, but in spite of this, views to the contrary are often presented as prevalent in public commentary, and these views may be influencing the marginalisation of religious values and spiritual expression within the primary schools.

### **A visit to any faith school will show children enthusiastically engaging in Religious Education.**

A visit to any faith school will show children enthusiastically engaging in Religious Education. The vast majority of the children interviewed in Smyth's study (2010) indicated that they would still take religious and moral education class if they did not 'have to' and many children suggested that they would like to see more time devoted to the subject area (p. 118). O'Farrell (2016) found that children exhibited a sense of agency in matters of the spirit and claimed the importance of God in their lives regardless of whether those at home held God in the same regard.

If the 'competent child paradigm' is to be taken seriously, children's voices in this matter need to be heard and reflected in any curriculum structure being proposed by the NCCA. Eliminating

Religious Education from the curriculum, reconceptualising it as the patron's programme, and marginalising it within the curriculum is not representative of the expressed needs of the child.

Religious Education, understood here as education into and from a particular faith as well as about faith and belief in general, and engagement with the spiritual and moral are 'goods' that children themselves have sought and will continue to seek for their own sense of self, their own sense of belonging and ultimately their wellbeing.

In light of this, it is very unfortunate that the consultation document does not provide any reason for the serious omission of the spiritual and the sidelining of Religious Education in the curriculum.

## INTERNATIONAL DOCUMENTS AND STUDIES

The proposal of the NCCA in its consultation documents, specifically in terms of Religious Education, goes against a number of educational developments in Europe and the UK. For example, it seems to ignore the following European developments: *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (2007); the proposals put forward by forty-seven foreign ministers of the Council of Europe in 2008 known as *Recommendations*; and *Signposts* (2014).

More and more educators agree that 'teaching about religion' must be accompanied by 'teaching from religion' and 'teaching into a particular religion'. For example, Martine Abdallah-Preteille, a French educator, suggests that religious stereotypes and prejudices cannot be overcome simply 'by disseminating more information, more knowledge, by legislating or even moralising' because 'it is now generally agreed that knowledge in itself does not suffice to change attitudes'. She goes on to say that 'reductionism in interpreting cultural and religious facts can only lead to dogmatism and extremism, which are always dangerous' (2004, pp. 55, 53).

Similarly, John Keast, editor of *Religious Diversity and Intercultural Education*, published by the Council of Europe, points out that, 'learning about religion is insufficient in itself to produce the kind of respectful attitudes that community and social cohesion requires in a multi-faith society' (2007, p. 62).

There is near agreement among seasoned practitioners of interreligious dialogue that appreciation of difference and of another religious tradition succeeds best when there is already in place a 'teaching into a particular religion'. The NCCA proposals here (and more obviously in their proposals on ERB and Ethics) seem to entirely ignore this finding.

The one lesson arising out of the many analyses and reflections on the 9/11 attacks on the US is that the isolation of religion from education, the separation of religion from society, is not good for religion and is not good for education or society. Habermas believes that the liberal state:

has an interest in unleashing religious voices in the political public sphere, and in the political participation of religious organizations as well. It must not discourage religious persons and communities from also expressing themselves politically as such, for it cannot know where secular society would not otherwise cut itself off from key resources for the creation of meaning and identity. (2006, p. 5)

The need for the explicitly religious in education is as real as the need for it in society more generally.

Similarly, with the movement of migrants and refugees across Europe, there have been many calls from political leaders (in the UK, Austria and Germany) for a greater integration and dialogical critical engagement with religion rather than moving in the direction of a privatisation of religion.



The consistent call by European governments is not about the absorption of other religions but an attempt to promote mutual understanding, respect and tolerance within the emerging diversity of religious identities. There is general agreement that the isolation of religion from society and from education can give rise to a fundamentalism which can become a breeding ground for the radicalisation of young people.

The European University Institute and the European Research Council 2015 report on *The Future of Religious Education in Europe* notes as one of its conclusions that:

Knowledge about religions in secularized European society is declining with possible serious effects both for democracy (the reciprocal understanding of religious and secular citizens is at stake) as well as culture (the historical cultural memory, often tied to a specific religious tradition ...). (p. 5)

The removal of Religious Education from the state curriculum is at odds with the thinking of a host of intellectuals, researchers and research centres who see Religious Education incorporating knowledge of religion as well as religious knowledge to be vitally important in contemporary Western society (Gearon, 2013; Roy, 2015; Moore, 2007).

The NCCA consultation document also seems to neglect key aspects of the UK report, *Children, their World, their Education: Final Report and Recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review* (2010), which states:

On the question of Religious Education, we take the view that religion is so fundamental to this country's history, culture and language, as well as to the daily lives of many of its inhabitants that it must remain within the curriculum. (268)

Echoing this, in his report, *Doing God in Education* (2010), Trevor Cooling sees that beliefs, including religious beliefs, are integral to human knowing and, therefore, education (p. 37). He argues that a 'fair approach to educational policy and practice in a diverse society will see religion as a potential resource that contributes social capital through promoting the common good' (p. 58).

The NCCA consultation documents also appear to ignore the review of Religious Education in schools in the UK announced in 2016. This review is taking place in the context of a decision by the UK government in 2012 to establish its first All Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education to provide a medium through which parliamentarians and organisations with an interest in Religious Education can discuss the current provision of Religious Education, press for continuous improvement and promote public understanding of Religious Education.

Very significantly, John Keast has stated to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education that:

Issues of religion and belief are frequently at the top of the news agenda and RE helps young people make sense of this and of wider world affairs. RE is a popular subject that has been growing – over 60 per cent of all 16 year olds choose to take it at GCSE and the number studying it at A-level has more than doubled in the last 15 years. People value, support and want RE. If these figures drop as a result of other subjects being prioritised through the curriculum and in the English Baccalaureate, schools will not be able to recruit and retain specialist teachers and this will impact on how a vital and valued subject is taught. ([www.philip-davies.org.uk/news/all-party-parliamentary-group-religious-education](http://www.philip-davies.org.uk/news/all-party-parliamentary-group-religious-education))

At a time when Oxford University, the oldest university in the English-speaking world, has established its first professorship in Religious Education, it is odd that the NCCA's proposal would be sending signals that the State is no longer invested or interested in whether children should experience Religious Education in primary schools.



# The Wider Curriculum and Coherency

By excluding Religious Education from the core curriculum, the NCCA is also, in fact, depriving the core curriculum of a resource that has the potential to enrich the wider curriculum. The Primary School Curriculum (1999) is founded on the principle of the integration of learning. The importance of integration in children's learning is also recognised in the current NCCA proposals on time and structure. The ways in which Religious Education can and does support learning in other curricular areas are clearly outlined in the Irish Episcopal Conference document, *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland* (2015), where an extensive list of the possibilities for cross-curricular links and opportunities for integrated studies are noted (pp. 163–85).

**By excluding Religious Education from the core curriculum, the NCCA is also, in fact, depriving the core curriculum of a resource that has the potential to enrich the wider curriculum.**

The following examples can be mentioned: the relationship between religion and environmental studies, recognised by the United Nations and promoted by Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si': On Care of Our Common Home*, which was enthusiastically received all over the world, both by secular bodies and other religions; the link between religion and culture; the significant work done in Religious Education in terms of inter-religious learning; the rapport between ethics and religion; the contribution that religion can make to literacy.

The isolation of Religious Education from the rest of the curriculum also underestimates the ethical contribution that Religious Education can make by: promoting the dignity of the individual; developing personal identity in a way that also highlights the social dimension of human identity; promoting human rights and responsibilities; highlighting the importance of human relationships; developing social justice and climate justice, with particular emphasis on the preferential option for the poor; and providing a foundation for social cohesion and solidarity.

In consideration of the current NCCA's proposal, there is a need for an intellectually coherent philosophy of integration for the primary curriculum. In terms of this kind of coherency as it relates to Religious Education and the primary curriculum the following might most obviously be noted:

- a. If the international research clearly shows the importance of integration for young children's learning, it makes no sense whatsoever to suggest that one aspect of children's learning – their spiritual, moral and religious development – should occur in isolation from other dimensions of their learning.
- b. It is valuable to recognise how the Religious Education curriculum is currently integrated by teachers into the overall primary school curriculum (1999). First, it should be noted that the integration of Religious Education into the curriculum as a whole *does not mean that other subject areas are used as a means to teach religion*. Every subject has its own integrity and must be taught according to its own particular principles and methods; however, Religious Education makes a strong contribution to the goals of the primary school curriculum in other areas of knowledge. In light of the recognised problem of curriculum overload, an understanding of these cross-curricular links between each patron's programmes and the wider curriculum would seem an imperative, particularly in what is being

envisaged for teaching and learning in either the two-stage or three-stage model proposed by the NCCA.

- c. Teachers concerned with the holistic nature of children's learning will recognise the potential for valuable links between spiritual, moral and Religious Education and all other areas of the curriculum. It would be difficult to find an educator who would suggest that children's spiritual and moral education is confined to Religious Education in any school or at any level. For example, children's spirituality is enhanced through poetry, drama, literature, art, dance and music, to name but a few. Equally, a child's ethical education happens throughout the school day and is not confined to the Religious Education or ethical programme of the school.

The current proposals by the NCCA would require that we pretend that either the child's spiritual and moral development is fostered only in the State curriculum time, or it is only fostered during the patron's time. In the latter case teachers are asked to deny the fact that the spiritual and moral development of the child simply does not work that way.

- d. If we agree that children's spiritual and moral development is fostered throughout the whole curriculum (albeit more obviously in Religious Education than in any other area), then we have to face the prospect of accepting the real implications of a commitment to integration of learning for all schools, including the fact that in any coherent philosophy of integrated learning for primary school children, patronage will and does matter. Anything less than this brings the NCCA into concerning territory, namely the violating of the human rights of children whose parents have chosen particular types of schools for the distinctive spiritual, moral and Religious Education they offer. The difficult and challenging issue of patronage cannot and should not be dealt with through any

kind of curricular reform that does not respect the right of all parents to choose the type of school in which to educate their children.



# ERB and Ethics

**The difficult and challenging issue of patronage cannot and should not be dealt with through any kind of curricular reform that does not respect the right of all parents to choose the type of school in which to educate their children.**

A specific issue that needs to be raised is that the proposal to remove Religious Education from the core curriculum bypasses the results of the recent consultation by the NCCA on the ERB and Ethics. This is a cause of real concern given the significant issues identified by a wide range of contributors, and not just those working in Catholic education, to that consultation process. Despite concerns expressed, the NCCA is seeking to introduce ERB and Ethics at various levels and in a variety of different ways to the core curriculum. The specific concerns the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference had regarding ERB and Ethics as presented in the NCCA's consultation documents of 2015 remain.

The question must be asked: how is it that the State recognises the importance of ERB and Ethics but at the same time appears to be seeking to remove Religious Education from the core curriculum? This question is of particular concern given the direction being taken in Europe and elsewhere to emphasise the importance of Religious Education, as outlined above.

There is a significant issue relating to the language being used around the patron's programme. Some may think that the patron's programme is always a form of Religious Education where children



will explore and learn about and from religions, worldviews and ethics. Currently, this is broadly the case but it may not be so into the future. The patron's programmes are not necessarily or essentially concerned with. The patron's programme falls under the subject on the curriculum Religious Education, so, when Religious Education no longer exists as a subject (as with the new proposals), there is nothing to stop the patron's programme from doing things outside of spirituality, morality/ethics and religious faith and worldviews education. In time, children may not necessarily study Religious Education at all. It could come about that since the State will have removed itself from any interest in this subject, it will have no say in such a situation. We will then be back to the difficulty that the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism identified for children who sit out of denominational Religious Education: we will have children going through primary education without having done any form of Religious Education.

## **ETHOS OF FAITH SCHOOLS**

In addition to explicit concerns around the kind and quality of integrated education being offered in the NCCA consultation on time and structure, we have concerns regarding the ethos of faith schools. Religious Education in faith-based schools is inseparable from the ethos of the school. The Education Act (1998) specifically requires the minister to have regard for the characteristic spirit of the school in exercising his or her functions with regard to curriculum (section 30[2][b]). Further, the minister must allow reasonable instruction time in the school day for subjects relating to or arising from the characteristic spirit of the school (section 30[2][d]).

The NCCA proposals in areas impinging on Religious Education and the characteristic spirit of the school are of a different nature to other NCCA proposals. As stated earlier, school principals were particularly concerned about the potential negative impact on

their school's ethos of removing Religious Education from the core curriculum. The concern is that Religious Education, now relegated most unhelpfully to 'flexible time', will in time be entirely eclipsed and indeed replaced by the NCCA's own programme, ERB and Ethics.

## OTHER CONCERNS

When the proposals, as outlined in both the consultation document and the executive summary of the consultation document, were presented at different regional meetings, concerns other than those surrounding the removal of Religious Education from the core curriculum were expressed. There were practical issues arising out of the fact that few of those present had heard about the consultation except through their diocesan education secretaries or the local diocesan advisor. This is significant given the importance of what is being proposed. While the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference accepts that this is the first phase of what is likely to be a longer and wider consultation process, it is obviously important to bring all partners into the conversation as soon as possible and as comprehensively as possible.

Principals also expressed concern around what they termed 'initiative overload'. With every new initiative, however well intended, come new demands on schools, sometimes with limited resources to implement the changes being introduced. Principals wondered if the changes being presented by the NCCA were, in fact, premature given some of the more recent changes being implemented, notwithstanding the extensive rationale provided by the NCCA in the introduction to the consultation document.

In light of this sense of initiative overload, it is also significant that at all of the various meetings with stakeholders, questions were asked about the timing of this consultation and its stated purpose. Many of those who attended wondered if what was being proposed

was the wrong answer, particularly in terms of the time allocation piece, to the right question around curriculum overload. Many queried whether the approach being suggested would decrease the pressures on the curriculum in primary schools. The concern is that what would, in fact, happen is an increase in time for numeracy and literacy and a real diminution in a whole range of other current subjects, including Religious Education. The potential negative effects of this on children's learning were highlighted as a real cause of concern.

In addition, at these meetings serious questions were raised about how realistic it is to include provision for preschool learning through the two ECCE years and into junior and senior infants (possibly beyond) when the preschool sector remains so significantly separate from primary education in this country. Concerns were raised around the attempt to base learning, possibly up to second class, on the kinds of themes and methodologies presented by *Aistear*, a curriculum framework that has not received the kind of resourcing and support on the ground as is being suggested by the consultation documents.

A number of principals and teachers working in schools in disadvantaged areas expressed their view that the kind of approaches being suggested for the teaching and learning of children up to second class that have arisen from *Aistear* are not always effective or helpful.

Finally, in one additional consultation meeting with parents, parents themselves expressed alarm that they had heard nothing about the consultation and that as the key stakeholders in their children's education, they had a right to be informed and properly consulted with on the NCCA's proposals.

## OTHER USEFUL DOCUMENTS

To further an appreciation of Religious Education as a legitimate curriculum subject in itself and the centrality of Religious Education within Catholic schooling (and, perhaps, by analogy, also other denominational types of schooling), the Commission making this submission would like to draw attention once again to the NCCA's extensive engagement in the area of Religious Education in post-primary education. It would like also to point to documents issued by the Catholic bishops of Ireland, such as: *Vision 08: A Vision for Catholic Education in Ireland* (2008) and the more recent *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland* (2015). The Catholic Schools Partnership has also produced valuable documents, such as *Catholic Primary Schools in a Changing Ireland: Sharing Good Practice on the Inclusion of All Pupils*. There is much literature on Catholic Religious Education. See, for example, works by Gareth Byrne and Patricia Kieran (2013), Anne Hession (2015), Mary Shanahan (2017) and Sean Whittle (2017). These publications echo and support international literature on the subject; for example, the works of Leonardo Franchi (2016), Michael Buchanan and Adrian-Mario Gellel (2015), Miller et al. (2013) and Trevor Cooling (2010).

## CONCLUSION

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

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